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RANCH ROMANCES

First September Number

Heritage of Conflict

A Tale of Troubled Times

By L. P. HOLMES

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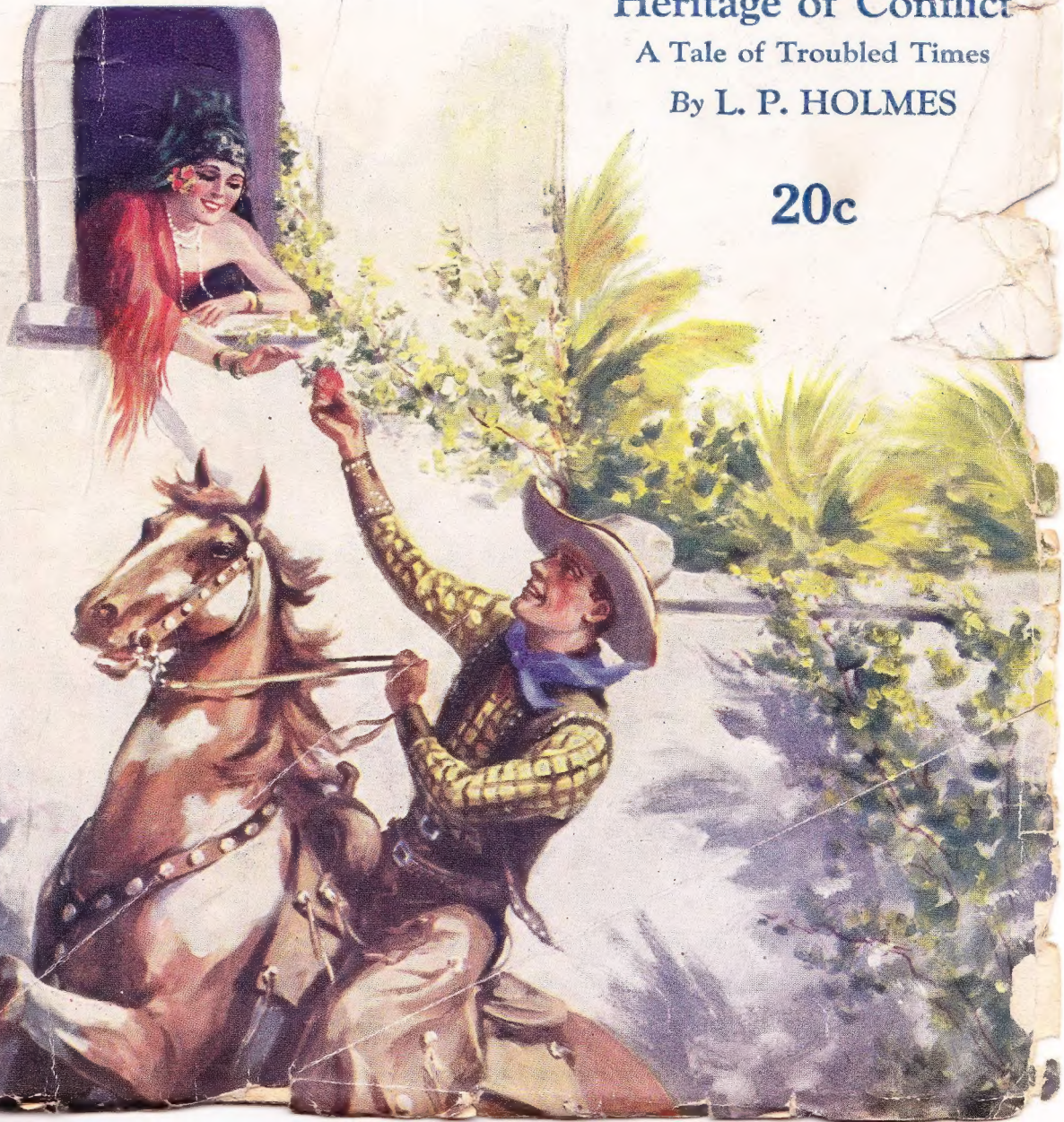

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Heritage of Conflict

By L. P. Holmes

A glorious bit of rangeland was Loma Carlyle's heritage, but with it came a gang of traitorous, thieving riders. And then, because Loma was too lovely a thing to be left in such hands, Fate sent a stalwart young rancher to protect and cherish her.

CHAPTER I

New Country

ON the rim of the great tableland which rose with mesa-like abruptness from the red, hostile gulf of the Durango Desert, and then swept away to the north in mighty undulations until it buried itself in the green, timbered slopes of the Cobalt Mountains, the little cavalcade of three horses came to a panting halt.

The trail up from the desert had been steep and winding and treacherous. With it safely behind them, the animals seemed to relax with the thankfulness of a precarious climb well completed.

The lone rider, who bestrode the lead horse and led the two pack animals on a single, running rope, seemed to relax also, and turned glad eyes on those distant, cool slopes which lay quiescent and brooding and enchanting under the bright pour of the sun.

Loma Carlyle had been envisioning the Cobalt Mountains for the past month and her first real view of them was not disappointing. Now, face to face with their majesty, she forgot the scorching, weary miles of desert travel and the hair-raising climb to the rim of the tableland.

Her tan Solarmon Stetson was swept off, disclosing a head of sleek, blue-black hair, cunningly massed at the nape of her neck. Excitement built a fan of color in her cheeks, and her eyes, astonishingly blue, shone under a like stimulus.

"There they are, Buck," she cried. "We'll camp on them tonight and tomorrow we'll be home. Think of it, Buck—no more sand and heat and alkali. No more 'sour' water and bitter grass. I can't wait to get there."

Her mount, a square-built sturdy little buckskin gelding, rolled a lazy eye, wobbled his ears a few times and proceeded to doze. He was quite willing to take his time and rest a bit. But the girl's eagerness was not to be denied. She donned her hat, lifted the reins and Buck stepped out obediently, the pack animals shuffling along behind.

Despite the direct impact of the sun, the air was vastly different from that of the desert. The added elevation of the tableland helped, and there was a soft, vagrant wind sweeping down from the Cobalts, crisp and invigorating and bearing a faint fragrance of balsam. Even Buck noted the difference and unconsciously quickened his pace.

A half hour slid by. The sun was slanting downward, heading for a couch in the misty blue of the distant mountains, where they curved, a hundred miles distant to the west. The first timber was not far away now, less than a mile, and Loma could pick out individual trees, giants which loomed above their fellows.

The last of the undulations of open land lay ahead, higher and steeper than any of the rest, and up this final slope the horses panted, to the accompaniment of creaking leather. At the crest, Loma rose high in her stirrups to look over. Abruptly she settled back and reined Buck to a quick halt.

She seemed to hesitate just a moment, before slipping from the saddle and dropping the reins to the ground. Then, crouching, she moved upward, taking off her hat again. At the very crest she lay flat on her stomach, peering through a handy clump of wild oat.

In the shallow swale beyond, little more than a hundred yards distant from her own position, were three riders. Two of them had their backs to her, while the third was facing towards her. Something about their postures sent a queer, gripping fear into Loma's throat. They were crouched in their saddles, leaning forward, their mutual gaze never wavering. The horses of the two with their backs to the girl, were moving, sidling slowly apart.

And then, with startling speed, the one who sat his horse alone, spurred his mount to a rearing twist and raced off towards the timber, hunched low in his saddle. Quick as the move was, one of the other two was quicker. His hand lifted and steadied. There was a spurt of flame, a flat, thudding report, and the fleeing rider went headlong from his saddle, to lie a twisted blot upon the earth.

For a long moment, Loma did not breathe. Horror steeped in her veins at the cold-blooded maneuver she had just witnessed. But this did not keep her immune to a sudden wave of white-hot anger. She saw the other two riders lift their horses to a run, heading for the timber where the dusk was beginning to gather in thick, purple shadows. Then she whirled, raced back to Buck, jerked out her rifle and panted to the crest again.

The fleeing horsemen were close to cover now, just a few jumps away. Swiftly the irate girl levered a cartridge into the chamber, dropped on one knee and took the best aim she could. The gun leaped in recoil and spanged its challenge across the world. She saw one of the distant horses rear and lunge, but it kept on going. Before she could shoot again, both riders were out of sight in the timber.

Careless and unthinking of her own safety, Loma rose to her feet and ran down into the swale towards the fallen man, rifle still clenched in her hands. She did not think of the chance that

the other riders, now safe in cover, might turn and shoot.

Evidently the fleeing men did not halt, for Loma reached the side of the victim unchallenged in any way. She dropped on her knees beside him, recoiling from the rapidly spreading crimson stain on his shirt. He was lying on his face, spread-eagled. Loma dropped her rifle and turned him over. She saw a young-old face, bronzed and hard-bitten, gray beneath the deep tan. Shuddering, she felt for a pulse. There was none, for the rider was dead.

Loma sagged back, her face white and stricken. Somehow she had not expected this. He had been so full of surging life a moment before. She grew dizzy and sick, the world darkening before her eyes. She might have fainted had not a harsh, grim voice pounded suddenly upon her ears.

"Reach high! Quick—yuh dry-gulchin' rat. Claw the clouds!"

Subconsciously, Loma did as directed, turning with trembling slowness to face this new threat. She saw a rider there, some ten yards distant, a grizzle-haired, eagle-featured rider, whose cold, bleak gaze seemed to cut right through her, and whose right hand gripped a huge, black gun that pointed with unwavering steadiness squarely at her heart.

For some reason she spoke, almost stupidly. "He—he's dead!" she quavered. "They—they killed him."

The grizzled old rider stiffened, his narrow eyes widening as he stared at her. "Good Gawd!" he ejaculated. "A woman!"

Momentarily the gun he held moved off line, then jerked back to its original, unwavering position. "Steady!" he rasped. "Don't try any tricks like that on me. Git on yore feet and back away from that rifle. Quick!"

Somehow Loma mastered her trembling limbs enough to do as bidden. There she stood, biting her lips and closing her eyes tight in a futile attempt to dam up the sudden tears. She heard the pound of another horse approaching. She heard an excited exclamation in a new voice, a keener and younger voice than the other.

"Dad! What is it? Why, that's Long Andy. Is he daid?"

"So this young hell-cat says, who shot him," rumbled the older man. "She was jest—"

Loma's eyes jerked open, blazing through the curtain of tears in indignant refutation. "I did not shoot him," she cried hotly. "That's not true."

"Holy smokes!" so gasped the new arrival, staring at Loma. He was tall and lithe and broad of shoulder, with the same eagle-like features possessed by the older man. Loma met his look defiantly.

The young fellow jerked his gaze from her, looking at the older man.

"Yuh say she shot Andy?" he demanded.

"Nothin' else but, son. There was two shots, not so awful far apart. I was down yonder past the curve of the swale. I come up slow, not knowin' jest what to expect. I seen her runnin' down towards pore Andy, her rifle ready for another shot if he showed signs of life. She didn't hear me comin' up behind her an' I got the drop easy. But I didn't think it was a woman I was coverin'—not till she turned. I didn't think any woman would pull a trick like this."

Loma's tears were gone. The blue of her eyes intensified until they were almost purple. Hot denial suffused her. She stamped her foot. "I tell you I didn't shoot him. There were two others. They—"

"Don't lie to me," growled the older man. "Jest where are those other two?" His tone was contemptuous.

"Wait a minute, Dad," broke in the young fellow. "Let's listen to what she has to say. Maybe we've got some apologizin' to do already."

Loma's posture grew less tense. "I saw it all, from up there," she nodded towards the crest. "There were three of them. That poor fellow there was

facing the other two. They had their backs to me. They were spreading apart, as though to get him between them. Suddenly he spurred his horse to a whirling start and made a run for the timber. They shot him then—brutally, cold-bloodedly—in the back.

"I saw red, I guess. Anyway, I ran back to my horse and got my rifle. When I got where I could see again, the two killers were racing for the timber—almost in it. I shot at them once and believe I creased one of their horses. It acted like it. Then I ran down to see if I could help the rider they shot. I had just found that he was dead, when you came. That's all—and it's true."

The older man laughed sarcastically. "A pretty yarn, but too damn thin. Son, yuh—"

The younger man lifted his hand. "Keep yore shirt on, Dad. I can soon find out if she's telling the truth. Wait a minute."

He spurred his mount forward and began searching the ground in the rapidly fading light. He soon struck the tracks where the killers had raced for the timber. He went to the crest of the swale and looked over. Then he came back to the dead man and dismounted, making a careful examination. When he straightened up, his hat came off.

"I'm apologizin' for Dad an' me, miss," he said quietly "Dad, put that gun away. She's told the truth. Andy's gun ain't on him. First time I ever saw him without it. An' he wouldn't have made a run from no two men on this earth, even if they had the drop on him—not if his gun was in the leather. I don't understand all this, but I'm shore the lady's on the square. Her outfit is up yonder over the crest. Saddle hoss an' two pack animals."

The old fellow gave in grudgingly. "That don't sound exactly regular either," he growled. "Why would any lone woman, especially a young, handsome one like this gal, be rammin' around the country alone with a pack outfit? Mebbe she didn't do this killin', but I'm bettin' she's tryin' to cover up somebody else's tracks. She musta had a man with her."

"Bosh!" snorted the young fellow. "Don't yuh think I know how to read sign better'n that? I tell yuh she's given us the truth. Use yore haid!"

He turned to Loma. "I'm Link Sanderson—an' this is my father, called 'Eagle' by them who know him. Shore, I'm sayin' again that we're sorry we misjudged matters."

His lean, hawkish features lit up with a disarming grin that Loma responded to immediately. "I'm glad to know you" she answered quietly. "My name's Loma Carlyle, and I am heading for Thunder City. Can you tell me how far it is?"

"Too far for yuh to reach tonight," he said promptly. "A good twelve miles at least. Unless yuh know the trails, yuh'd be foolish to try for it in the dark."

"I guessed as much," she nodded. "I intended to camp for the night as soon as I could find water."

Link Sanderson frowned. "It's none of my business, of course. But this country ain't exactly safe for a lone girl to camp out in. Yuh'd better come on home with Dad an' me. Yuh'd be right welcome. There's a easy trail from our outfit to Thunder City an' yuh could make the ride in tomorrow."

For a fractional second Loma was on the point of accepting this invitation. Then her eyes went to the grim old cattleman who she felt was still viewing her with suspicion, and her manner stiffened. "Thanks, but I'll be all right. I've been camping alone every night for nearly a month. I'm used to it—and I have my rifle. I'm not afraid in the slightest."

Young Sanderson did not press his invitation. He shrugged. "If yuh cut straight into the timber from here, yuh'll pick up a meadow mebbe three hundred yards up the slope. There's a spring at the upper end."

"Thanks again. If you've no further objections I'll go after my horses and head for it. I want to get located before dark."

Link shrugged again. "Okeh. In the mornin', if yuh look over to the east from the meadow spring, yuh'll see a pretty sizable ridge where the timber thins out on top. It runs due north into the main range. On top of that ridge is a trail. Follow it until yuh strike the mouth of Bear Creek Canyon. Turn due east there an' cut across the flank of the range about two miles an' yuh'll run into the regular Quarter Circle S trail leadin' to town. Turn left an' yuh cain't miss Thunder City."

"Thank you. Good-by."

Loma picked up her rifle and climbed out of the swale to her horses, standing patiently just where she left them. She was much her old self again, as far as being in control of her truant nerves, but her exultation had died. This vivid, enchanting world had been smirched with the touch of violent death, and the grim specter seemed to cling and mock her. Her face was sober as she placed the rifle in its boot and swung into the saddle. Lifting Buck into a swing, she moved down into the swale again and headed directly for the timber.

Over on her right, bulking dark in the purple dusk, the Sandersons stood beside the dead man. They had caught Long Andy's horse and were lifting the dead rider into the saddle. Looking back once more, just before entering the timber, Loma saw them riding away to the east, along the curving course of the fatal swale. The next moment she was in the pungent blackness beneath the timber.

She found the meadow without any trouble, and Buck's own eager, thirsty nose located the spring for her. She dismounted and went expertly about making camp. Packs and saddles were removed and the three horses watered. The pack animals alone she picketed in the midst of the luxurious grass below the overflow of the spring. Buck she let go free, for she knew he would not stray.

Dry fuel was abundant and she soon had a fire going. She put on her battered little coffee pot and, while waiting for it to heat, spread tarpaulin and blankets. By the time the coffee was turning over she had bacon crisping in the pan and a small pad of camp bread browning before the flame.

She ate slowly and with relish. At the same time her thoughts were busy. With the fire crackling so briskly and cheerfully before her, the fatal shooting episode seemed to take on an atmosphere of unreality. All was so peaceful now, so still.

About the rim of the meadow the towering conifers nodded in slow cadence before the playful push of the night wind. The air was keen and crisp and fragrant with the breath of the trees. The winking stars were brilliant and warm and close. Human hate and conflict and all baseness seemed very far away now.

But Loma did not allow the spell of the night to delude her too far. She was hard-headed enough to know better. As she washed her utensils, she frowned. She tried to recall what the two killers looked like, for the notion had come to her that she would report the matter to the authorities as soon as she reached Thunder City.

It was with some dismay that she realized she could not surely identify either of the men. Their backs had been towards her all the time, and such had been the jumbled condition of her senses she had noted no identifying characteristics about their horses, even had such characteristics existed.

All in all it was considerable of a puzzle to Loma, knowing so little of the why and wherefore of everything. Certainly she had not enjoyed the part she had had to play. And somehow she felt almost angry that her first impressions of the new country that was to be her home, should have been shattered as they were.

CHAPTER II

The Eagle's Chick

WHEN Loma awoke, the sun was in her eyes. She lay for a moment, staring up into a golden sky, blissfully content. Of a sudden she realized that a fire was crackling and that the air was heavy and fragrant with the aroma of coffee and sizzling bacon. Startled, she sat upright, and her eyes opened wide with amazement.

Crouched over the fire, wielding an expert fork on the bacon, was none other than Link Sanderson. His back was towards her, but she recognized him instantly. Before she could catch her breath, he spoke.

"Good morning! Miss Carlyle," sounded a pleasant drawl, "I'm beggin' yore pardon for takin' these liberties with yore grub, but if yo're half as hungry as I am, yuh'll forgive me. How d'yuh like yore aigs—eyes open or shut?"

"Eggs!" exclaimed the startled girl, trying to master her confusion and surprise. "I had no eggs in my outfit."

She saw his wide shoulders shake as he chuckled. "I know it. I brought 'em in from the ranch. Thought yuh might like some. An' I've made a mess of 'dough-gods' that look pretty dang good, even if I do say so myself."

Loma's surprise gave way to a feeling of indignance. How long had this drawling young fellow been around her camp, anyway? And what right had he to intrude in this fashion? Her tone was cold and full of censuring sarcasm. "I don't know about the eggs and 'dough-gods.' But certainly there is nothing wrong with your nerve. Is it the custom in this country to make so free and easy with other people's property?"

"Well," grinned Link, "we folks try an' be hospitable. Now don't waste this grand mornin' rawhidin' me. My intentions are the best in the world. I thought yuh'd be kinda tickled to find breakfast all hot an' waitin' when yuh woke up. What say we eat first, an' then yuh can ride me bug-huntin' afterwards? How did yuh say yuh liked them aigs?"

"I didn't," snapped Loma. "But as long as you insist—leave the eyes open."

She slid out of the blankets and yawned, pulled on her boots and, with soap and towel unearthed from her saddle bags, crossed to the spring. The water was so cold it seemed electric, and the rebound of it filled her with such a sense of glowing well-being that she found her anger and indignation dissipating fast. As she toweled her face briskly she cautiously observed this rather forward young rider.

Grudgingly she had to admit that he was good to look at. His face was particularly fine. The hawkishness of his profile gave him a look of intense, brilliant virility, the jaw showing strength and indomitable will. It was the face of a fighter, fearless, intelligent and strong. He was tanned to a mahogany brown. He wore a blue woolen shirt and blue jeans, over which were strapped flaring batwing chaps, worn and use-scarred. His boots were expensive, quilted ones and his spur rowels were taped. Loma scored a count in his favor for that. Evidently this man loved horses too much to punish them with naked rowels.

In stature he was tall, with wide, flat shoulders and the narrow hips of a rider. About those hips sagged a cartridge belt, carrying a walnut-butted gun. His neckerchief was a neutral shade, his Stetson black and pushed back far enough on his head to show an expanse of crisp brown hair. She saw that his eyes were gray, flawless, clear and keen.

Apparently he was not watching her in the slightest, but he spoke suddenly with a humorous quirk on his lips, and his words set the color to beating hotly in Loma's cheeks.

"Shore hope I qualify under examination," he drawled. "But I warn yuh that looks can lie. I'm ornery an' pig-haided an' lazy as all get-out."

"Indeed!" retorted Loma. "I'm quite

sure I'm not interested in the slightest."

"My mistake," he chuckled. "Well, let's eat. Grub's ready."

There was nothing wrong with the appetite of either of them and they ate with a relish. Neither spoke until the meal was finished. Then Sanderson rolled a cigarette and inhaled gratefully.

"I'll explain myself," he stated. "After reachin' home last night, Dad an' me decided that we hadn't ought to have let yuh run the risk of campin' here alone, us knowin' this country better than yuh. So I grabbed a blanket an' them aigs, an' came back.

"I came jest close enough to make out the gleam of yore fire. Then I bedded down, knowin' that if yuh got into trouble, I'd hear things goin' on. This mornin' I sneaked in an' started breakfast. Mebbe I hurt yore feelin's —but shore, I didn't mean to."

Loma was more mollified than she showed, for truth and sincerity were in his tone and words. But she persisted in her poise of chilliness. "I don't see why you believed me unable to take care of myself," she declared. "I don't believe there was a thing to fear."

"An' I don't believe yuh believe what yuh jest said," he returned coolly. "Yuh saw a man shot down in cold blood last evenin'. Those two yella curs who killed him are only part of the bad hombres who ride this country. No tellin' what might have happened if one of that stripe had been driftin' an' seen yore fire.

"I ain't sayin' but what yuh got plenty of spunk an' can take care of yoreself most of the time, but there's limits to all things. I jest felt a heap more easy knowin' I was close enough to help out in case yuh did have trouble."

Loma smiled. She knew he was right. "I'm sorry I was so grouchy," she said. "It was really very nice and thoughtful of you. Thanks a lot. And that breakfast was awfully good."

His answering grin was instantaneous. "That's better—a heap better. I knew yuh had plenty of common sense. Now I'm goin' to ask a favor of yuh. It ain't much to yuh, but it's a lot to Dad an' me. How about it?"

"It all depends, cowboy. Make things a little clearer. What is this favor?"

"Why, jest that yuh won't say nothin' about that killin' last evenin' when yuh reach Thunder City. It wouldn't do no good anyhow, an' Dad an' me can fight our own battles. We'd appreciate it a lot."

"I see," said Loma thoughtfully. "You feel that you can administer your own law, is that it?"

"I reckon. We allus have."

"Supposing you found out who it was that did the shooting. What would you do about it?"

She was amazed, startled—almost frightened at the look that swept over him. In an instant the smiling, personable young rider was gone, and in his place there was a man mature in action and thought. His hawkish features set in lines of savage harshness, almost cruelty. And his gray eyes became icy sparks.

"Yuh'd be surprised," he snapped. "Long Andy was a good hand, honest an' white an' square-shootin'. Somebody is goin' to pay for his killin'. Which reminds me of somethin' else I want to ask yuh. Would yuh recognize either of them killers was yuh to see 'em again?"

Loma shook her head. "I don't believe so," she answered soberly. "I thought of that last night, before going to sleep. You see, their backs were to me all the time and there was nothing about their broncos I could recall, except that they looked dark in coloring."

"I savvy," muttered Sanderson thoughtfully. "Their broncs mighta been bays or chestnuts or blue roans—or ten dozen shades in between. Which means they were exactly the same as a thousand other broncs. Wasn't there any words spoken, or names called?"

"No. That was what made it so ghastly. If words were spoken, they must have been very low. I couldn't hear a thing. I'm sorry I can't help you more. There is nothing I'd rather see

than those two brutes brought to justice."

"They will be," declared Link. "Yuh said last night yuh thought yuh creased one of their broncs."

"Yes. I'm really sure I did. When I shot, the animal lunged and reared as though the bullet had burned it somewhere."

Link got to his feet. "Well, that's somethin', anyway. I'll kinda go on a still hunt for a crippled hoss. Now, I reckon yo're anxious to hit the trail. I'll wash up these dishes an' help yuh pack."

Link got another surprise when it came to packing. He had known a good many men who understood the intricacies of a properly thrown diamond hitch, but Loma Carlyle was the first woman he had ever seen throw an expert one. He knew that he couldn't have done better himself.

This charming girl, with her striking coloring of black hair and vivid blue eyes, grew more amazing and rose higher and higher in his estimation with every passing moment. She was competent, handsome and possessed of extraordinary courage for one of her sex.

"This outfit shows a lot of hard use," he ventured. "Yuh've come quite a ways?"

"From Lee's Ferry."

Link whistled as he stared at her. "Clear across the Wild Hoss Badlands an' the Durango Desert?"

She nodded. "I'm used to hardship. I've had a lot of it."

Link swept off his hat. "Then mebbe yuh won't mind me sayin' that yo're the gamest an' most capable young lady I ever had the privilege of meetin'."

Loma colored, but said nothing as she swung into her saddle and gathered up the lead rope.

Link stepped back, his hat still in his hands. "*Adios,* Miss Carlyle. Foller the directions I gave yuh last night an' yuh can't miss Thunder City. My hoss is back where I bedded down. I aim to pick up the trail of them two killers an' foller it as far as I can. But I ain't hopin' for much. Mebbe yuh hit that hoss more center than yuh thought an' it coulda played out somewhere along the line. I'll take a look-see, anyhow. *Adios!*"

THUNDER CITY hardly fitted its sonorous name. It lay in a long, verdant meadow, walled on all sides by the towering green of coniferous timber. East and west, this timber ran up and up in ridge and slope until it thinned out at snow-line, above which reared half a mile more of mountain, bare and precipitous for the most part, but crowned at last with eternal snow. These peaks, called East Cobalt and West Cobalt, were the absolute crests of the range.

To the north a stage road ran out of Thunder City. It wound along in lazy curves through the timber, climbing slowly up to Thunder Pass, whence it dropped down through zigzag and cutback to the rolling rangeland beyond, leading finally to the town of Healy on the railroad. Forty-odd miles it was from Thunder City to Healy.

Perhaps a dozen people were visible when Loma Carlyle rode in, and every one of them stopped to stare at this vivid girl, riding alone with her pack horses. Most of the spectators were men, dressed in chaps, sombreros and spurred boots. But there was one stout, matronly-looking woman of early middle age, seated in a home-made rocker on the porch of a tiny cabin, and to her Loma turned for information.

"I wonder if you could tell me where I could find Judge Reynolds?" she asked, smiling pleasantly.

The answering smile was genuine and motherly. "Of course. I imagine you'll find him in his office. That is the third building up on your right. If he isn't there, stop at the blacksmith shop. The judge and my man Jim do an awful lot of arguing over politics."

"Thank you."

Loma rode on, dismounting before the building designated. It was a large building, given over in most part to a general store. But one small corner of

it held an office, over the door of which hung a sign:

Judge Thomas Reynolds. Attorney-at-law.

Loma knocked at the door and entered at a brisk bidding. Before a battered old desk sat a round, white-haired, rosy little man, with twinkling eyes and cheery lips. As he beheld Loma he jumped to his feet, bowing low.

"I am happy to see you, madam," he chirruped. "I am Judge Reynolds. What can I do for you?"

"I am Loma Carlyle," she said quietly.

"Ah!" said the judge. "I am happy to see you. Won't you sit down?"

Loma took the chair offered and laid a packet of letters on the desk. "You'll desire proof, of course," she stated. "You'll find it in there."

The judge adjusted a pair of old-fashioned spectacles and buried his nose in the papers. For ten minutes not a word was spoken. Then he looked up and nodded.

"Not a question," he said. "I'm very glad you have come, Miss Carlyle. I feel now that I have discharged my debt to your uncle. Bert Mannering was a very good friend of mine. But I had begun despairing of locating you."

"I'm sorry. I was teaching school in a little out-of-the-way town in northern Arizona. It was only by merest chance that I ran across the personal advertisement in an old paper."

The judge rubbed his pudgy hands together. "Better late than never," he beamed tritely. "I suppose you wish to take over control of the inherited property immediately."

"I'd like to. I've come quite a distance, and I'd like to get settled as soon as possible."

"Very well. It will take a few days to get the necessary paper work done, but there is no need of your waiting around until then. When all is in readiness I'll get word to you, and you can drop in any time then to close the matter up. The ranch—your ranch now, Miss Carlyle—lies southeast of town, some fourteen miles. It is a valuable inheritance, and one of great future promise. Your uncle's registered brand is the Bar C 88. I suppose you'll keep that."

"Yes," nodded Loma. "I see no reason to change. If it was good enough for Uncle Bert, it is good enough for me."

"That's common sense," approved the judge. "You'll find the ranch in good shape. Deuce Coburn, the foreman, is a capable man and has been very conscientious over his responsibility since your uncle's death."

They discussed matters for nearly an hour. Then Loma thanked the judge and left.

Outside the office, she hesitated a moment, then headed for the wide, dusky door of the store. There were several personal purchases she wished to make.

A rider was coming along the street towards her. His step was unsteady. Obviously he had been drinking. His eyes, bloodshot and set, were fixed on Loma and the impact of them sent a queer ripple of revulsion through her. She hurried her steps to gain the open door. But the rider anticipated the move and got there ahead of her. He blocked her way, teetering on his toes.

There was a depraved viciousness on his leering features, drink-sodden and brutal. Loma tried to slip past him, but he shot out a grimy hand and caught her by the shoulder.

"Not so fas', sister," he blurted. "Not so fas'. Lemme git a good look at yuh. Damn me fer a sheepherder, if yuh ain't a li'l' beauty. C'mon, smile fer me."

On the contrary, Loma's eyes turned violet and smoky with anger. She had met drunken men before and had been accosted by them, but never had one dared lay his hand on her. This fellow's touch made her flesh creep. She tried to jerk away, but the grip on her shoulder tightened. The drunken leer became a grimace of anger.

"So-o—tha's it, eh?" the fellow snarled. "Think yo're too good fer Texas Jack to talk to, huh? Show yuh —bet I'll show yuh. Fer that yuh'll

have to kish me, 'fore I let yuh go."

Loma's answer was purely reaction. With her free hand she slapped him, and such was the power of her lithe young strength, the ruffian staggered back. But his grip was maintained. He cursed and dragged her towards him. She fought him off frantically, kicking and struggling.

Dimly she sensed the approach of a running horse, pounding down the street. The animal came to a halt nearby and a saddle creaked. The next moment a human catapult flashed between Loma and the drunk. The impact threw her back against the wall of the store, jarred and bewildered.

She saw the drunk reel a step or two, then catch his balance, spouting curses. The curses broke off before the sodden *spat* of a hard-swung fist and the drunk went headlong, where he lay in a sprawled, motionless heap. Over him stood the wide-shouldered figure of Link Sanderson, his face a cold, relentless mask, his eyes narrow and gleaming.

"I oughta gun yuh where yuh lay, yuh rotten coyote," Sanderson was growling. "I will, next time I meet yuh —so help me I will. From now on this range is too small for yuh an' me, Texas Jack."

Suddenly Link seemed to realize that his words were wasted, for the rider was out cold. He straightened up, turned and faced Loma. His hat came off. "Did he hurt yuh?" he demanded.

She shook her head. "No—no. But—" she shuddered.

"I understand," said Link. "He's a filthy brute, who's been around these parts over-long. I'll see to that little matter as soon as he snaps out of it."

The ominous purport of Link's words steadied Loma. "Let's forget it," she said quietly. "After all, he wasn't really responsible. It was the liquor in him."

"Not altogether," snapped Link. "He's jest naturally a crooked, no-good polecat, drunk or sober. He's like the rest of that Bar C 88 tribe. There's a house-cleanin' due an'—"

"Do you mean he rides for the Bar C 88?" broke in Loma.

"Yeah. But they're due to lose a hand today. Soon as he gets on his feet again, I'm givin' him his walkin' papers. I'll give him jest an hour. After that, if he's still around—well—" He left the sentence unfinished, ominously so.

Loma stiffened slightly. "What authority have you over the Bar C 88?" she demanded.

"None—outside of this." He tapped the gun swinging at his thigh. "But Colonel Colt is a powerful persuader at times. This is gonna be one of them. I allus used to think that Bert Mannering was a pretty level-haided sort of a feller, but after lookin' over that bunch of coyotes he put in charge of his ranch jest before he died, I've had to revise my opinion. They ain't fit for hell-room, not one of 'em. Mannering musta been gettin' childish in his old age."

Loma's eyes were a smoky violet again. "Of course, I'm thanking you for what you did just now," she stated coldly, "but you'll oblige me by keeping your opinions of my dead uncle to yourself. As for him,"—she nodded towards the drunken rider, who was beginning to stir again—"I'll have him discharged immediately."

It was Link Sanderson's turn to be astounded. He stared at her. "Good Lord!" he ejaculated. "Bert Mannering—yore uncle? Then you must be that heir that Judge Reynolds has been tryin' so long to locate."

"I am. Is there anything wrong in that?"

"But—but—" Link stuttered aimlessly. "Good Lord! You—why, yuh ain't figgerin' on takin' charge, are yuh?"

"I am—immediately. Why not?"

"Why not? Why not? Shucks! It'd take me the rest of the day to tell yuh why yuh cain't."

"I beg your pardon," said Loma stiffly. "I see no reason why I shouldn't. Judge Reynolds tells me my title is absolutely clear. The ranch is mine, and I intend to run it."

"But yuh get me wrong, Miss Carlyle," Link persisted seriously. "I ain't questionin' yore ownership. I'm sayin' yuh cain't go out there alone. Somebody has got to go with yuh—some other woman. Yuh see—"

Loma shook her head. "I don't see why I shouldn't. I'm quite able to take care of myself, thank you. Again, I'm obliged."

She nodded and pushed by him, entering the store. For a long moment Link stared after her, then, growling a low curse, he turned to face the rider he had knocked out. Texas Jack was sitting up now and the vacuousness of his expression faded gradually.

He was fingering the gun at his belt, but Link stepped swiftly forward and jerked it away from him. He thumbed open the loading gate of the weapon and jacked out the cartridges. Then he tossed the weapon back at its owner's feet.

"Yore time is up, feller," Link growled. "This country is sick of the sight of yuh. Yuh got an hour to get out—not a second more. I'll be in town that long. Next time yuh an' me meet it's a showdown, with the smoke a-rollin'. I've told yuh somethin'."

Turning on his heel, Link went to the door of Judge Reynolds' office and entered without knocking. Texas Jack watched him go, then crawled to his feet, sober now and with his depraved features a mask of hate. He reloaded his gun, slouched down the street and mounted a bronco, roweling the animal cruelly as he went surging out of town.

Judge Reynolds looked up at Link Sanderson's abrupt entrance, saw who it was, and smiled pleasantly. "Howdy, Link. What brings you here?"

"I come in to tell yuh that yuh oughta have yore haid felt," said Link shortly.

The judge's merry eyes twinkled. "Thanks for the suggestion. Being human, I make blunders. And after some particularly bad blunder I've often thought I ought to, myself. What's wrong?"

"Plenty. What in the name of common sense did yuh wanta send that Carlyle girl out to the Bar C 88 spread alone for? Yuh oughta know better than that."

The judge laughed. "Link, you're an alarmist. I'm quite sure she'll get along very well."

"I differ," snapped Link. "She's haidin' for trouble, shore as yo're a foot high. Yuh oughta've warned her off."

"Bosh! You're like a small boy—seeing goblins behind every tree. I know you don't like Deuce Coburn, but that doesn't alter the fact that he is a good man in his place—a mighty good man. He's run that ranch right up to snuff, since Bert Mannering's death. I've been keeping a very close check on things and I can't find a single mistake. His tallies are full and complete and showing a nice increase. Yes, Deuce is doing a good job."

"Mebbe," growled Link. "I wasn't referrin' to the business side of things, though. My kick is that no girl, 'specially a young an' pretty one like Miss Carlyle, should be allowed out at that ranch alone. Good Lord! That Bar C 88 crew is the hardest collection of nuts I ever saw on a ranch. They ain't got no respect for Gawd or man. An' Deuce Coburn ain't any better than the rest of 'em."

"On the contrary," observed the judge imperturbably, "I consider Deuce a very reliable foreman. Granted that some of his riders are wild. But Deuce is quite capable of keeping them in their place. No, Link, you're whistling in the dark."

Link shrugged and turned to the door. "Have it yore own way, Judge. Mark my words, though, there'll come a time when yuh shore will go to an expert to have yore haid felt."

Link slammed the door savagely and stood for a moment, glowering down the street. He saw Loma Carlyle leave the store with several small packages in her arms. These she stowed away in her saddle bags, mounted and rode out of town. When the fringe of timber had swallowed her up, Link prowled

along, frowning and thoughtful. Through the clear, sparkling air resounded the clang of a blacksmith's busy hammer.

Link's frown was replaced by a smile. He hurried along to the little cabin where the kindly-faced woman still sat in her rocker. He tipped his hat, grinning boyishly. "Howdy, Missis Downs," he greeted her, perching himself on the low step at her feet. "Yo're lookin' mighty pert an' handsome today."

Stout Mrs. Downs smiled fondly. "You young scalawag," she retorted. "You don't fool me a bit. You've got some scheme up your sleeve. What is it? Out with it!"

Link twirled his hat in his lean, strong, bronzed hands. "Well, it's thisaway, Missis Downs. Bert Mannering's heir has finally showed up. Judge Reynolds has turned the Bar C 88 over to her. She—"

"She!" ejaculated the surprised lady. "Do you mean to say that vivid girl with those wonderful eyes, who was looking for the judge, is Bert Mannering's heir?"

"Well," said Link dreamily, "she shore has got wonderful eyes. Bluer than I ever thought eyes could be. An' they turn a sort of smoky violet when she gets mad. Yes'm, I reckon that's her."

"Well, now, isn't that fine? I'm awfully glad. I liked that girl the moment I saw her."

"Yes'm," agreed Link again. "So did I. But Missis Downs, she's gonna be out there all alone with that bunch of wild hombres that ride for the Bar C 88, an' I don't feel right easy in my mind about it. Now if there was another woman with her for a few days—a older woman—why, mebbe them knot-haided Bar C 88 peelers would realize that she's got friends here in town that are interested in her, an' sorta keepin' an eye open to see that she ain't bothered none."

Mrs. Downs pursed her lips thoughtfully. "There's something in what you say, Link," she admitted. "I suppose you are hinting that I'm that elderly woman?"

"Well, sort of."

"But, Link, how would I ever get out there and back? There isn't a chance of driving out in a buckboard, and it's been years since I was on a horse."

Link grinned impishly, running his fingers through his hair. "Well, yuh know, Missis Downs, I been thinkin' for some time that yuh oughta take up ridin' again. They do say it is swell exercise for the figger. An' I know where I can rake up a quiet, easy-ridin' little bronc that yuh couldn't get off a walk with a stick of dynamite."

Aunt Molly Downs' laugh echoed merrily. "You scamp!" she cried. "I'm almost tempted. But Jim Downs would be scandalized."

"Don't yuh worry about Jim," said Link, realizing that the victory was won. "I'll knot his tail if he gets ructious. I'll go get that bronc right away. An' I'll ride out most the way to the Bar C 88 with yuh. Be back in a jiffy."

He loped away, chuckling. Molly Downs looked after him, her eyes soft. "It's the sorrow of my life that God never sent me a son like you, Link Sanderson," she murmured.

CHAPTER III

Blotted Brands

THE first glimpse Loma Carlyle had of her future home was more than favorable; in fact, it brought back to her an exultation akin to that she had experienced when first she glimpsed the charm and grandeur of the Cobalt Mountains. The trail from town had wound along the southern slope of the mountains, leading always east.

At first it had led for miles through solid, unbroken aisles of timber, where one rode in perpetual twilight. But finally a change took place. The timber thinned. Meadows, enchanting in their luxurious green and smeared with slashes of wild flowers, became more and more numerous. The steady slope of the range gave way to broken coun-

try that gradually leveled out until Loma glimpsed ahead a tremendous valley, shaped like a V.

One arm of the valley ran directly east. The other stretched out to the south, reaching down towards a great, vague gulf of mist and harsh colors which she judged was the Durango Desert. A central ridge, lanced with timber, separated the two valleys, which narrowed as they reached their apex until only a cut gulch connected them.

At one point the view of the valleys was extremely clear, and here Loma reined in momentarily. All up and down the emerald expanse of the open ranges she could make out herds of grazing cattle, the red backs and white faces of which shone resplendent in the clear, crisp sunlight.

Far down the southern arm was a group of toy-like cubes, which Loma identified as buildings. But try as she would, she could not make out anything of the sort in the eastern terrain until she had ridden some two miles farther on. Then, of a sudden, she saw the headquarters of the Bar C 88.

The buildings of the Bar C 88 were numerous and all sizes. Beyond them was a maze of stake and rider corrals. All corrals save one were empty and in this some score of horses were racing and twisting, trying to escape the cunning ropes in the hands of two punchers. Outside that corral, a portable forge was being operated by a third man, while three others were working about a bronco that was thrown and hogtied.

The man at the forge was the first to see Loma and he called a warning to the others, who dropped their work immediately. It seemed that they were full of suspicion and distrust, for one of them openly stepped apart to pick up a Winchester rifle, which he held in readiness in the hollow of his arm.

Somewhat perturbed at this reception, Loma rode slowly forward. One of the group spoke sharply to the others, then strode out to meet her. He was a big man, tall and thickly built, with enormous shoulders. His skin was either swarthy or very heavily tanned, and his face harshly featured.

Loma was the first to speak, and as her soft, melodious tones struck his ear, the rider stiffened in amazement.

"How do you do?" she said. "I am Loma Carlye. This, I judge, is the Bar C 88 Ranch?"

The rider was so completely taken back he seemed momentarily bereft of speech. He stared at her. Then he recovered and swept off his sombrero.

"This is the Bar C 88, right enough, miss. So yo're Miss Carlyle, eh? Shore, I'm glad to see yuh. I'm Deuce Coburn. If yuh've talked to Judge Reynolds, he probably mentioned my name."

His voice had a peculiar quality, heavy, slightly thick and with a touch of arrogance in it. But he was patently trying to be agreeable and Loma felt no resentment.

"Yes," she nodded. "The judge spoke of you—and very favorably. I see that you and the other riders are busy, so don't let me interrupt your work. Just show me the main house and I'll look around and get settled. Later, we'll talk matters over and become adjusted."

"That's the main house—the one yonder, highest up the crick," said Coburn. "But first, give the boys a chance to meet yuh. Hi, gang, come over here an' say howdy to yore new boss, Miss Loma Carlyle."

As the riders approached, Loma remembered that Link Sanderson had called them a bunch of human coyotes, so she surveyed them curiously.

She was a trifle disturbed at their appearance. Coburn was by far the most prepossessing of the lot. To a man they were set of face, hard and wild-looking, with slouchy carriage and a baffling evasiveness of eye. All carried guns, two of them carrying two weapons apiece, the holsters of which were tied down with buckskin thongs. Their ages were problematical.

"Miss Carlyle, boys," introduced Coburn, "our new boss. From now on her

wish is yore order. Remember that. Dopey, go up to the main house with Miss Carlyle an' unpack for her. Put the stuff on the porch. Then take care of her broncs. Rest of yuh get back on the job."

He turned to Loma. "Yuh'll probably find the place kinda upset. It's been bachelors' quarters for quite a time. But soon as yuh see what yuh want done, call Dopey. He'll swamp out for yuh."

Loma nodded, then essayed a little speech she had been rehearsing all the way out from town. "I want to run the ranch along the same general lines as Uncle Bert did, men," she told them. "I want to be fair and just in all matters, and if you will help me out, I'm sure we'll all get along nicely."

Coburn smiled boldly at her. "That's a up-an'-down proposition, Miss Carlyle. I'll speak for the boys. We're with yuh to a finish."

The house, as Coburn warned, showed plenty of signs of male occupancy. It was dusty and disordered and in need of a thorough house-cleaning. Before Dopey had even finished unpacking for her, she saw that she was going to need help and plenty of it. She told Dopey so.

"Yes'm," he nodded. "I reckoned yuh'd find things kinda tore up. Be with yuh soon as I git these broncs cared for."

He bowlegged his way off with the horses and Loma gazed after him, telling herself that, aside from Texas Jack, this fellow was quite the most unprepossessing individual she had ever chanced to meet. He had lank tow hair, hanging untidily about his ears and shirt collar.

His face held an unnatural pallor in a country where men were normally deeply bronzed. His profile was a receding one, with buck teeth, a weak chin and peculiar, bulging, frog-like eyes. His clothes were badly worn and distressingly untidy.

Loma thought again of what Link Sanderson had said, and she grew a little panicky. But abruptly her slim shoulders stiffened and her head went up. After all, range work was hard work, requiring the services of hard men. And a cowboy who had been helping shoe refractory broncs in the dust and dirt and heat, could hardly be expected to appear immaculate.

Any lingering doubts which might have persisted were soon banished before a period of intense industry. The homey, sturdy log dwelling was swept and scrubbed from one end to the other. Walls were wiped down, windows washed and the pile of odds and ends of equipment thrown out on the porch grew to amazing proportions. The kitchen was given especial care, and Dopey worked as he hadn't worked in years.

Loma, indignant over the discovery of what seemed ten thousand dead cigarette butts scattered everywhere, drove the perspiring puncher unmercifully. Pan after pan of water was heated, used and thrown out. Dopey developed a crick in his back and his knees were sore from crawling over what seemed an acre of floor with scrubbing brush and bucket of soap suds.

"Men," stated Loma severely, "are natural-born pigs. You'd think that the whole wide world was one big ash-can for them to throw their cigarette butts into. And old boots—and socks—ugh!"

"Yes'm," agreed Dopey meekly. "Yes'm. That's right."

Eventually it was done, just as Aunt Molly Downs came ambling sedately up on a sleepy, mild-looking pony. Loma met her at the door with mingled surprise and swift pleasure.

"My dear," explained Aunt Molly, as she climbed stiffly from the saddle, "you've no idea what misery I've gone through to come on this visit. So don't grow angry with me. I'm just a poor, fat woman so full of aches and pains I could scream. Goodness! How good it is to get my feet on solid earth once more! And that poor horse! I'll bet he feels that the weight of all ages has been removed from his back."

She laughed then, with genuine mer-

riment, and Loma joined in. A sudden rush of affection for this amiable soul gripped her and she welcomed Aunt Molly with genuine delight. She realized now that a feeling of loneliness had been growing on her—loneliness for one of her own sex.

"Of course," said Molly, "I know who you are. Loma Carlyle, so that scamp Link Sanderson told me. I'm Mrs. Downs. Aunt Molly to all my friends." She eyed the pile of discarded equipment on the porch. "I see your feminine instincts to clean house have already asserted themselves. I hoped to get here in time to help. Men can be the most careless brutes."

They went inside, arm in arm. Dopey seized the opportunity to get away, and slouched down to the corrals, leading Aunt Molly's pony. The rest of the crew had just finished their job of shoeing as he came up. He stared at them sourly.

"Pigs," he muttered. "That's what yuh are, a bunch of careless brutes and natural-born pigs. She said so—an' I figger she's right, after all the muck I had to clean up. Goddlemighty! I'm worked to a frazzle. An' to think that some folks hire out for that kind of a job!"

LINK SANDERSON, having parted with Molly Downs just above the apex of the two valleys, rode down the south one at a leisurely lope. He felt a lot better, knowing that for the next few days, at least, the presence of Mrs. Downs at the Bar C 88 would keep the riders of that outfit subdued. And by that time he gambled they would realize that it would be unwise and unsafe to molest Loma Carlyle.

Link frankly admitted Loma's charms. She was unlike any girl he had ever met before. Good-looking, proud, and possessed of a certain vibrant charm he could not fathom. He only knew that the mere sight of her had set his pulses to throbbing and that from his very first look at her he had been unable to get her out of his mind.

He considered himself, without any suggestion of ego, to be pretty normal and sanely balanced, with a stricter code of ethics than most men boasted. And if Loma Carlyle's vivid beauty had so intrigued him, what would it do to the wilder and more unprincipled riders she would perforce come in contact with? Link frowned at the thought.

A small group of grazing Herefords scattered to let him pass, and with the instinct of long habit his eyes ran over them, noting their condition and number. His gaze fixed on one two-year-old and he reined in abruptly. Burned on that particular animal's flank was a Bar C 88 brand, which was in no way unusual in itself. Here, at the head of the valleys, cattle drifted back and forth, Bar C 88 stock mixing with his father's stuff and vice versa.

But to Link's expert eye that brand did not look exactly right. It seemed a little out of proportion and uneven, not at all like the usually crisp outline from a stamp iron. It might have been a maverick, of course, discovered by one of the Bar C 88 riders and branded with a running iron. Still . . .

He stared harder at the animal, frowning, his eyes narrowed. In sudden decision he unstrapped his riata from his saddle and ran out a noose. He kneed his bronco into a run and swept down upon the startled two-year-old.

Too late it scuttled for safety. The rope hissed out, writhing like a snake. The loop flew true, picking up both hind feet neatly. The wise bronco stopped and braced. The rope twanged tight and the startled animal, feet cut from beneath it, struck the ground with a thud.

While the pony kept the rope singing tight, Link knelt beside the panting whiteface and examined the brand very closely. His finger tips, sensitive and probing, traced the mark. When he finally stood up, his face was harsh and stern, his eyes cold. As he rolled a cigarette, his lips moved.

"So-o! That's it, eh?" he muttered.

"This particular brand will interest Dad."

He went back to his horse, mounted and slacked up on the rope. The yearling struggled to its feet, kicked off the loop and started to run. Instantly Link was after it, coiling his rope as he rode. He turned the animal and headed it down the valley towards home. His pony, seeming to understand what was wanted, stayed close on the two-year-old's heels, hazing it deftly along, thwarting every attempt the whiteface made to dodge off to the side.

Perhaps a mile had been covered in this fashion when, out of the timber to the east, a rider came loping; he was heading at such an angle as to cut off Link's progress. Link recognized the man instantly, but his only sign of it was to loosen his gun in the holster.

Some twenty yards distant, the newcomer reined in. He was a thin, spidery-looking individual, with hard, jet eyes in a swarthy face. Those eyes went over the two-year-old in a set stare, then fixed in unwinking intensity on Link.

"Where yuh haidin' with that two-year-old, Sanderson?" he demanded, his voice thin and reedy.

"I reckon yuh know, Glick." Link's answer was a cold drawl.

"I suggest yuh turn it loose again. Yuh might be accused of rustlin', an' in this country a rustler is open game for the fust man who can get lead into him."

Link's laugh was harsh. He was staring straight into those beady orbs now, his body smoothly tensed. "Those are the truest words yuh ever spoke, Glick," he retorted. "I know what yo're drivin' at. Spin 'em when yo're ready."

Spider Glick's reaction to these words were movements as smooth and fast as light. Both hands flicked down and up, and a twin report crashed across the silences.

It was a move that would have caught a more unwary man cold, with a sentence of certain death, for Spider Glick seldom missed at twenty yards. This time, however, he did, for the simple reason that Link Sanderson's body was not where it had been a split-second before.

At the slight settling move in the saddle Glick had made before he went for his guns, Link had slithered far over in his saddle. He hung practically out of sight on the off side of his horse, holding his weight by knee hooked about the cantle and left hand locked to the horn. Glick's two slugs cut past where Link's waist had been, one of them low enough to slash the chap leg above his knee.

Glick's guns made sheening arcs as he flipped them back, caught the hammers with his hooked thumbs, then threw down again. As they came level, Link shot once from under his horse's neck. The slug cut Glick's mount, just deep enough across the withers to cause the brute to drop to its knees, partially stunned.

Glick, caught unawares as his mount dropped so suddenly, was thrown forward on its neck. He fought wildly to regain his balance, snarling like a cornered wolf. He was too slow, however, for Link pulled himself back into his saddle and drove an accurate slug into the viperish gunman's chest. Glick gasped and rolled to the ground beside his horse.

Link waited a moment to make sure, then dismounted and walked over. Glick was dead, and Link caught the rein of the horse just as it lurched to its feet again.

The hard, relentless, hawkish look was on Link's face again, as he stared down at the dead man. "Lucky for me —unlucky for you, Glick," he murmured. "But yuh didn't have me fooled. Yuh were out for my scalp, whether I'd been bluffed out or not. If yuh'd had yore Winchester with yuh, yuh'd plugged me from the timber. I got no false idees about yuh, Glick—an' no regrets."

He reloaded his Colt, scanned the surrounding country to make sure no friend of Glick's was in the vicinity, then lifted the dead man into his own

saddle, tying him there with a thong. The reins he looped over the saddle horn, then he turned the animal until it was headed towards the convergence of the two valleys and hit it a cut with his quirt. It went off at a run with its gruesome burden.

Swinging astride, Link picked up the two-year-old once more and resumed his way, hazing it before him. A half hour later he had the whiteface in one of the Quarter Circle S corrals.

An amiable-faced puncher appeared in the bunkhouse doorway. "Go get Dad, Sleepy," called Link. "I got somethin' here to show him."

By the time old Eagle Sanderson appeared, Link had roped and hogtied the luckless whiteface.

"What's up, son?" rumbled Eagle, as he climbed into the corral.

"Plenty," was the succinct reply. "Take a look at that brand. See if it tells yuh the same story it tells me."

The old cattleman examined the brand with minute care. When he stood up and faced Link his face was cold and savage. "Where'd yuh find that critter?" he snapped.

"Up at the haid of the valley. The brand seemed kinda funny to me, so I roped the brute and looked it over. Then I brought it home. On the way I run into Spider Glick."

Eagle stiffened sharply and cursed. "The devil! What happened?"

"We shot it out," said Link quietly.

"What? Yuh shot it out with Spider Glick? Seein' yuh there, all in one piece, that's hard to believe, son."

Link showed the leg of his chaps where Glick's lead had ripped it.

"But what did he do then?" demanded Eagle. "Quit shootin'?"

"Jest about," said Link. "I out-foxed him an' got him center."

The old man stared at his son with wide eyes. "Yuh mean yuh killed Spider Glick? Shore, yuh didn't shoot him in the back, did yuh?"

Link flushed, but his gaze was steady. "I'm a Sanderson, Dad," he answered. "We don't shoot men in the back."

A grim smile twitched at the old man's lips and high pride gleamed in his eyes. "I'm apologizin', lad. But shore, knowin' Glick—an' knowin' yuh —well—"

"I savvy," nodded Link. "Glick's never been shaded before. But there's allus a first time, Dad. I happened to be the man to do it."

Eagle Sanderson stared out across the sunlit world, his face sobering again. "Son," he said, "takin' the life of a fellow man is serious business. I don't want any son of mine to develop into a killer. But sometimes it is a case of kill or be killed, an' I know this was one of them. Life's thataway in this country.

"Yuh may have to rock off more men before yuh die. I expect yuh will, seein' the turn things are takin' right now. But I hope it'll always be a case of self-defense with yuh."

"It always will be, Dad," said Link.

Quietly, Eagle shook his boy's hand. "I sired a man, son. I'm proud of yuh. Now, I reckon we better pay Deuce Coburn a visit. I wanta see how he'll explain that blotted brand. We'll take the whiteface along with us. But there's the grub call. We better eat first."

CHAPTER IV

Molly Downs—Amazon

AFTER the house-cleaning was complete, Loma Carlyle's first move was to heat up a huge tub of water and take a thoroughly satisfying scrub. On dressing again, instead of the jeans and shirt, she donned a simple gingham dress that she brought to light from one of the packs. These garments changed her appearance amazingly and heightened her femininity and charm. Molly Downs exclaimed with delight over her.

"Child, you're delicious, stunning. Why, you'll have these simple cowboys completely out of their minds. I'm warning you. Just watch them moon around."

Loma colored and laughed. "They'll

find me pretty practical, I imagine. I haven't any time for such foolishness."

Mrs. Downs shrugged. "I've heard that story before, my dear. When the right man comes along—well, wait and see."

"You're exaggerating terribly," protested Loma. "I haven't seen any of them yet who appeared greatly taken. Consider Dopey, that wretch who scrubbed out the house for me. I'm quite sure he'll hate me for the rest of my life. I bossed him dreadfully."

"I know one of them who is badly struck, right now," teased Mrs. Downs. "When some young man confides to me that a certain girl's eyes are bluer than he ever thought eyes could be, and added that those same eyes turned a smoky violet when their owner became angry—why I'd say that young man was quite impressed."

Loma's color deepened and she changed the subject. "I'm starving. Let's get something to eat."

By the time the meal was finished, the two of them were very good friends indeed. The straightforwardness of the elder woman, wholesome and cheery, Loma found very stimulating and full of comfort.

They had finished their meal and were sitting quietly talking, when a raucous yell of rage and anger sounded down by the corrals. It cut through the peaceful moment like the blood-hungry scream of some predatory animal, and the sound of it sent a chill up Loma's spine, while her cheeks paled.

"What is that?" she gasped.

Molly Downs had heard that sound before in her life and always it presaged violence and battle and sudden death. It was the voice of a man, gripped in insensate, killing rage. She did not answer Loma, but scuttled to the porch. Loma was right at her heels. Down by the corrals they saw the Bar C 88 riders grouped about a horse. Across the saddle hung a limp, ghastly figure, Molly Downs knew, and turned to shoo the girl back into the house.

But Loma's shoulders were straight and, though the pallor in her face had deepened, there was determination in the blue eyes that brooked no interference.

"I'm going down," she said quietly. "It must be one of my riders. I've got to know."

She approached the group, running. As she neared it, vicious, rage-filled curses seared her ears. It was Deuce Coburn who saw her first and snapped out a command that quieted the others. He turned and faced her.

"I wouldn't go no nearer, Miss Carlyle," he said gruffly, his face flushed, his eyes flaming. "I'll tell yuh about it. It's Spider Glick, one of our boys."

"He—he's dead?" asked Loma.

"Yeah; daid as a mackerel. He's been shot. Somebody'll pay for this an' pay plenty. I got a hunch who's responsible. The boys are gonna back-track the hoss and find out. We'll make 'em plenty sick. They cain't get away with it."

"They? Whom do you mean?"

"Those damned Sandersons—father an' son," bit out Coburn. "They're overdue. We'll settle the whole argument—now!"

He would have turned away, but Loma caught his arm.

"No!" she said spiritedly. "I'll have no feud talk. This is my ranch and what I say goes. You're not sure who did this, and you're not sure of the circumstances. Any one of you who makes some move without my orders is discharged. I mean it."

Unconsciously, Loma had raised her voice, and it carried far. The group split open, as a short, wide, bowlegged rider pushed violently through. Loma's first impression was that she had never seen such a maddened, depraved-looking human before. He had feral eyes, set deep under a sloping, narrow brow, eyes that glinted as red as those of a weasel on the kill. Some heavy blow in the past had broken the fellow's nose, and it spread thick against his face, with pig-like, flaring nostrils.

His mouth was a narrow, venomous gash, snarling and working. His throat and hands and wrists were hairy, like those of an ape. Two big guns sagged at his thighs, tied down. His voice, when he finally got words past his twisted lips, held the same horrible fury that had sounded in that first blood-curdling yell.

"What's that?" he barked. "We cain't go run down the polecat who did this? Yuh say we cain't? Hell! Try an' stop me—try an' stop me! No lily-faced dame can tell Joe Colinga what to do. They killed Spider—killed my pal, damn 'em. An' I'm gonna get 'em an' shoot their hearts out. Fire me if yuh want. To hell with the job! I wouldn't work for no outfit that ain't got the guts to fight for its own men. I'll settle this job myself."

Loma quailed before the fellow's fury. She couldn't help it. She thought of some mad, slavering animal. Coburn caught Colinga by the arm, trying to talk to him. But the ape-like rider jerked violently away and ran into the bunkhouse, to appear almost immediately with a Winchester rifle, into the loading gate of which he was stuffing cartridges.

Coburn turned to Loma, shrugging. She caught him up with a straight, scornful glance. "You're supposed to be foreman of this ranch," she cried. "If you are, stop that man. Stop him —or go with him."

"Don't be a fool," growled Coburn roughly. "Colinga is on the kill. Yuh cain't reason with him now. If I tried to, he'd gun me. I've seen him this way once before. An' he's right in one thing. We ain't worth much if we cain't fight for our own punchers."

"But he doesn't know," argued Loma helplessly. "He doesn't know who did it. He might shoot some innocent person."

"Not him. That's one thing about Joe. His first wildness will work off in a minute. After that he'll turn wolf —all wolf. He'll ferret out the trail, if it takes him six months. In the end he'll get his man. See—he's calmin' down already."

This was true. Colinga had quit his mad jerkiness of movement and was saddling up almost calmly. But this change, to Loma, held an even worse threat than his initial wild outburst.

And then a fresh yell from one of the punchers turned all eyes to a new phase of movement. Cantering slowly down the valley came the Sandersons, Eagle and Link. Before them trotted a badly blown whiteface two-year-old. Eagle had his right hand up, palm foremost, in the age-old sign of the frontier. He wanted to parley.

Intense excitement gripped the Bar C 88 riders. They milled around uncertainly. Joe Colinga, noting what was going on, came prowling forward, leaving his rifle leaning against the corral fence. Loma, with sudden decision, advanced to meet the two riders. Slowly, almost grudgingly it seemed, Deuce Coburn slouched at her heels.

But Molly Downs, totally unnoticed by anyone, slipped over to the corral, caught up Colinga's rifle, and with it held from sight in back of her ample figure, moved quietly up until she stood just behind the gun's owner.

The Sandersons reined in. "Coburn," rumbled Eagle. "We got somethin' to show yuh. Link, rope that critter."

Link swept down upon the steer, which tried to run. But for the third time in as many hours, it was upset violently by an unerring rope.

"What's the idee?" growled Coburn. "I've saw critters roped an' throwed before."

Eagle paid no attention to this attempt at sarcasm. "Take a look at that brand. I'm anxious to hear yore explanation."

Coburn hesitated, running the tip of his tongue along his lips. It was Loma who stepped forward. "Mr. Sanderson," she said evenly, "as owner of the Bar C 88, suppose you let me look at the brand. What's wrong with it?"

Eagle stared at her. Grudging admiration showed in his deep eyes. "If

yuh know anythin' about brands, yuh'll soon find out, miss. But if yuh really want me to say so, I'll tell yuh. That brand was originally a Quarter Circle S. It's been blotted to a Bar C 88—an' a botched job it is, too."

Loma's breath quickened as she bent over the steer. If what Eagle Sanderson said was true, here was a very serious situation indeed. And she did know something about brands—enough to discern quickly through touch and visual scrutiny, that Sanderson had stated the case. She straightened up and turned on Coburn.

"Mr. Sanderson is right," she said coolly. "How do you explain this, Mr. Coburn?"

"I don't know nothin' about it," growled the foreman, plainly disconcerted. "If yuh say it's true, I believe yuh. But it don't hold that I did it, or any of the rest of our boys. Mebbe it's a plant that somebody pulled to try an' start trouble between the Sandersons an' us. Or mebbe it's a frame-up."

"Don't lie, Coburn," barked old Eagle, his eyes flashing. "That kind of talk won't get yuh anywhere. I expected yuh'd say yuh didn't know anythin' about it. The same holds true for yore whole damned crew. But I wanted to show yuh that Link an' me got our eyes open. An' here's a warning for yuh. If this happens again, I'm holdin' yuh personally responsible—an' I'm comin' after yuh."

Coburn shrugged his shoulders in a show of bravado. "Any time—any place, Sanderson. Right now, if yo're feelin' that way!"

Eagle laughed harshly. "Tough—an' brave, ain't yuh?—with yore whole pack behind yuh. I've noticed yuh sing damned low when yo're alone. But that's aside from the main question. I come over here to lay the cyards on the table—face up. Yuh know jest how we stand now. C'mon, Link, we'll be goin'."

"Jest a minute—you two!"

These words came from the edge of the group of riders, a few yards back of Loma and Coburn. Loma turned and saw Joe Colinga there, discolored teeth bared in a snarl, squat body crouched, hairy, brutal hands dangling and clutching close to his guns.

"Jest a minute," he repeated. "I'm askin' *you* a question. What d'yuh know about Spider Glick bein' wiped out?"

It was Link who answered. "As much as you do about Long Andy bein' murdered, Colinga."

Colinga's answer to that was a raucous curse, and his hands blurred downward. He was fast, much faster than the average. But at that moment a stout, keen-eyed matronly woman was faster. Aunt Molly Downs, watching Colinga like a cat would watch a mouse, swept the gunman's Winchester out from behind her and, with the same movement, whacked the barrel emphatically along the side of his bullet head. Colinga went down in a heap.

"Take that, you filthy brute," snapped Aunt Molly, stepping back, levering in a cartridge and then leveling the rifle at the startled and astounded group of Bar C 88 punchers. "I'll shoot the first one of you to make a crooked move."

For a moment dead silence reigned. Then Link Sanderson laughed, soft and drawling. "Missis Downs," he chuckled, "my hat's plumb off to yuh. That was the neatest thing I ever saw. Yuh shore patted that jasper down. Yuh either put a dent in his haid or yuh bent that rifle barrel.

"Anyhow, me an' Dad are thankin' yuh. Anythin' we got is yores. I'm gonna shake hands with Jim Downs every time I meet him. He's shore to be congratulated. Dad, we better be rammin' out of here. Missis Downs holds the fort. *Adios!*"

The Sandersons whirled their horses and rode away, but Link, before he left, looked directly into Loma's wide eyes, bowed, tipped his hat and smiled. And to a man, aside from the unconscious Colinga, the Bar C 88 stood and watched them out of sight.

THAT evening Deuce Coburn came up to the house and asked to speak to Loma. Aunt Molly let him into the living room and took a chair to hear what was going on. Coburn was plainly ill at ease.

"What is it you wish?" asked Loma quietly.

"Why I jest wanted to tell yuh that I fired Colinga," blurted the foreman, his eyes downcast. "He had no business goin' on the prod like he did, so I got rid of him. I talked it over with the other boys an' they figgered I was right in doin' it. They also asked me to tell yuh that they're plumb satisfied with their jobs here an' want to keep 'em.

"They'll toe the scratch an' obey yore orders without a question. Naturally we were all kinda het up about Glick bein' killed, but in thinkin' it over we figger that whoever rocked him off musta had a good reason. Spider was a trouble hunter. He jest took on a hombre he couldn't handle."

"I see," said Loma. "But I've a question to ask. How do you explain that blotted brand the Sandersons showed us?"

Coburn shrugged. "I cain't. I got an idee though, if yuh care to hear it."

"I would."

"Well, I been thinkin' that mebbe Glick did it. Yuh see, a couple of weeks ago, him an' me had a run-in of sorts. I put him in his place, but I know he's been sore about it. He was a good hater, Glick was. I figger he blotted that brand with the idee of lettin' the Sandersons find it, so they'd be on my neck about it, which they was.

"Mebbe while he was steerin' the critter out where it'd shore be found, he run into either Eagle Sanderson or his son. They musta called Glick an' beat him to the draw. Which he shore had comin' to him if my idee is correct. Sooner or later Colinga is goin' to start somethin' with the Sandersons an' I don't want him a member of the Bar C 88 crew if he does. It don't pay to fight with yore neighbors."

"No, it doesn't," agreed Loma. "But I heard you say out there today that the Sandersons needed cleaning out, as you put it. What basis have you for such a statement?"

Coburn looked uncomfortable. "Put it down that I was jest mad at the time, an' not thinkin' like I ought to. Runnin' a ranch in this country is no snap. Yuh got plenty of troubles an' yuh got to fight for what yuh get, an' then fight harder to hang onto it. A feller cain't be blamed for swallerin' his haid once in a while."

"Very well," said Loma. "We'll forget it for the time. We'll see how the future turns out. You may tell the men you are all on trial. If you behave yourselves and do as you are told, you'll be kept on. But the first defiance of my authority will mean immediate dismissal. Here is one ironbound order that must not be violated. Leave the Sandersons alone, understand?"

"Okeh with me, Miss Carlyle," declared Coburn in relief. "Thanks a lot. I'll tell the boys an' see that yore orders are carried out. G'night."

As the door closed, Loma turned on Aunt Molly triumphantly. "You see? Fundamentally Coburn and the other riders are all right. I won't have any trouble with them. They're anxious to please."

Aunt Molly snorted. "Bosh! Child, use your head. I've known Deuce Coburn a sight longer than you have. It isn't in him to turn so low an' humble unless he's scheming something. An' the rest are just like him. You want to watch out for trouble. It's in the air. I can smell it."

Loma sobered. "Let's talk of something else. I'll have bad dreams as it is."

CHAPTER V

Cards off the Bottom

THE following morning Loma donned her riding togs again and set out to look over her newly acquired domain. She would have liked to have

Molly Downs accompany her, but that worthy lady begged off.

"Don't mention a saddle to me again for a few days at least, honey," groaned Mrs. Downs. "I'm so stiff and sore now I could scream."

So Loma rode out alone and headed down the valley. It was a beautiful day and eight hours of sound sleep the night before had done much to dissipate the depressing aftermath of Spider Glick's killing.

While not having been raised on a cattle ranch, Loma had sufficient judgment and common sense to know that her inheritance constituted an ideal range. Water was unlimited, the feed was luxurious and heavy, and timber offered secure shelter at all times of the year. Also, due to the conformity of the country, cattle would not stray very far from their initial range.

Loma traversed the entire length of the valley, marveling at its extent. Eventually she reached the lower end of it, where it fell away rapidly in a great slope towards the southeast. There was a section of tableland again, and beyond that the Durango Desert. Selecting the peak of a grassy knoll, she dismounted, ground-reined her pony and squatted cross-legged on the grass, staring out into the blazing infinity to the south.

She was vaguely troubled. Just before going to bed the previous night she had looked through a lot of old tally sheets, dated a few weeks before her uncle's death. A hasty calculation showed that slightly in excess of four thousand head of stock were then carrying the Bar C 88 brand. In her ride down the valley she had made a rough count of the cattle she passed and the best she could make of it was around twenty-five hundred. So, she was wondering.

Perhaps half an hour passed in silence. Then her bronco lifted its head and, with pricked ears, looked down the long slope of tableland. Loma, following the look of the horse, saw a rider down there, jogging slowly along, scrutinizing the few head of cattle that were there. Loma recognized Link Sanderson.

Her first thought was to take her mount and slip back out of sight before Link saw her. But this quickly passed and a rebellious glow built up in her.

Link was plainly checking up on Bar C 88 cattle. Evidently he was on the search for more blotted brands. Loma felt somehow that his implication was that she was a thief. The color in her cheeks mounted as, with quick decision, she swung into her saddle and cantered down to meet him. When she came up he doffed his hat and smiled.

"Howdy, neighbor," he greeted her. "Fine mornin', ain't it?"

"It will do," replied Loma coldly. "What brings you here?"

"Just takin' a look-see at some more brands," Link admitted. "Findin' that other one sorta made me curious."

"Any luck?" She took no trouble to hide the sneer that came unbidden to her tongue.

Link looked at her very steadily. "Some," he drawled quietly. "Fourteen by exact count."

The arrogance went out of Loma. "Fourteen!" she gasped. "You're certain of that?"

"Pretty shore. My eyes are right good."

Loma was scarlet, but she stood to her guns. "I'm very sorry," she murmured. "That puts me in the position of being a thief, doesn't it?"

"Not at all—not at all," reassured Link staunchly. "But it's time you an' me had a good talk. Let's 'light down an' take it easy."

Suiting the words to action, Link dismounted, rolled a cigarette, then stretched his long, lithe carcass on the grass. Loma hesitated but a moment before climbing down and sitting beside him.

"Well?" she demanded.

"I'm gonna talk straight out," said Link briefly. "An' please understand that what I say is for yore own good. I know yo're proud an' a mite stubborn

besides, but down deep yuh got plenty of good common sense."

"Thank you," said Loma, some of her old stiffness returning. "Suppose we dispense with the personalities and get down to facts. I imagine you are going to warn me about Deuce Coburn again. Everybody except Judge Reynolds seems to have it in for Coburn."

Link laughed softly. "Yuh can fool some folks, but yuh cain't fool 'em all. If it'll make yuh feel better I won't say a word about Coburn. I'll jest tell yuh somethin' of what has been goin' on an' yuh can judge for yoreself. First off, Dad an' me have been figgerin' lately that some of our stock was missin'.

"Jest how many haid we cain't tell until we look over our stuff at the spring round-up, which starts next week. But we're shore we been losin' some. We never did before—not while Bert Mannering was alive. We allus got along good with Bert. He was a square-shooter. Findin' that blotted brand yesterday sorta pointed the way, an' what I've seen today just about cinches matters."

"In other words," cried Loma, "the Bar C 88 has been rustling some of your stock."

"No," said Link gravely. "Not *the* Bar C 88—which is you. But the men who are ridin' for the Bar C 88 shore enough are."

"But why should they do it? How can they benefit? I own the ranch—and none of them ever saw me before yesterday morning. They owe me nothing. Why should they steal for me?"

"I thought of that," admitted Link slowly, "an' could only find one answer. Tell me, have yuh any idee how many cattle was carryin' the Bar C 88 iron when yore uncle died?"

"Why—yes, I think so. I looked over some tally sheets last night and I arrived at a rough figure of something over four thousand head."

"That oughta be about right," nodded Link thoughtfully. "It might be illuminatin' to have a range count made now. Somethin' tells me there wouldn't be near that many by a long sight."

Loma paled slightly. "What you mean is that Deuce Coburn and my other riders have been stealing from me as well as you. Is that it?"

"Exactly. They probably figgered that Judge Reynolds would be a long time findin' the heir to the Bar C 88—which he was. Durin' that time they intended to sell off the Bar C 88 stock an' pocket the proceeds."

"In that case, why didn't they make one big round-up and clean the whole ranch out at one stroke?"

"Because they mighta had a lot of trouble disposin' of the stock. Four thousand haid is a sizable herd of cattle. It would have been sure to start talk, no matter where they drove to. An' yuh cain't allus find a buyer right off who can handle a herd of that size. But by sellin' a couple hundred haid at a time they could do it. An' they been doin' it."

Loma was fighting against this reasoning, though something told her that this lean, bronzed young fellow was hitting squarely at the truth of matters.

"How about the figures Coburn has been furnishing Judge Reynolds?"

Link laughed quietly. "Any liar can figger. The judge claims he's been checkin' up on Coburn very carefully. Yeah, he has—by figgers that Coburn has been furnishin' him. Nothin' is easier than jugglin' a tally sheet. Any fool can put down normal increase percentage, if he knows cattle at all—an' I'll give Coburn credit for knowin' cattle all right.

"The judge means well, an' he's a honest ole coot, but the only way to check up Coburn's figgers is to make a thorough range count, which the judge couldn't do if he tried."

Loma surprised Link. "I believe you are right," she admitted gravely. "I rode down the valley this morning, checking up on the cattle I saw. I do not claim to know a great deal about cattle raising, but if there are four thousand head of cattle on my range, I don't know where they are."

Link straightened, rolling another cigarette. "Now we can get down to brass tacks," he exclaimed in satisfaction. "Coburn has been stealin' yore cattle. He's been blottin' our brand into yores an' stealin' our stuff, too. We got to think up a way to put a noose around that jasper's neck."

Loma shivered. "Don't talk that way. We've had enough of death already. And, by the way, did you kill Spider Glick?"

Link nodded, his eyes narrowing. "Yeah. It was him or me. He figgered he had me cold, but his string played out the wrong way."

"And your conscience doesn't bother you?"

"Not a bit. I'm moral shore that him an' Colinga killed Long Andy. When we got Andy home the other night, we looked him over an' found rope burns on his arms. We savvy now how they got his gun off him. They roped him from some sort of ambush, disarmed him, then plain murdered him. D'yuh expect me to feel sorry for rockin' off a human coyote who'd do such a thing? Hardly. An' one of these days I'm liable to look Colinga over in smoke."

She looked at him soberly. He was staring off into the distance, his keen-featured face set and implacable. Loma thought that she had never met such a proud, resolute, capable-looking man before. And she had to admit his attractiveness—the clean, hardy fiber of him, with abounding virility. Her heart quickened slightly and color crept into her cheeks.

"If what you surmise is true, I cannot blame you for feeling as you do," she admitted quietly. "And I hope you do not think that I would sanction anything crooked on my ranch."

Link looked at her, his eyes softening. "The only thing I can think about yuh is that yo're the gamest, proudest, finest little lady I ever knew. We're gonna be friends, you an' me—good friends. But yo're up against a crooked deck an' yo're gonna need help to handle the play. My first idee was to tell yuh to fire yore crew—all of 'em. But I think yuh'd better hold on to 'em for a while.

"We'll give that smart rooster Coburn a little more rope an' mebbe he'll hang hisself. I'm goin' on a trip for a few days to check up. When I get back I'll let yuh know how we'll act. What say we meet here again about—lemme see—say next Saturday. That'll gimme four days."

"Very well, I'll be here," promised Loma.

Link held out his hand. "Let's shake on that, pardner."

There was a caressing note about his last word, and Loma felt her cheeks burn hotly. But she shook hands. Link's palm tightened about hers and he looked deep into her eyes, blue and shining.

"Yeah," he murmured, "we're gonna be friends—mebbe more."

Loma fled. She sent her horse up the slope at a run and did not look back until she reached the mouth of the valley. Even here her pride told her not to look back, but her heart told her otherwise—and won the argument.

Link stood just as she had left him, looking after her. She could not make out his features, but he waved his hat. And Loma waved back, glad that the friendly distance hid the luminosity of her glance and the wild throbbing of her heart. Then she spurred onward, out of sight.

She enjoyed riding back to the ranch house a great deal more than she had leaving it. And her thoughts were not about cattle or the troubles that faced her at all. Instead, they were all of Link Sanderson.

"He's nice, Buck," she whispered to her pony. "I like him awfully well. But that is a secret between you and me, understand, you rascal?"

Buck wobbled his ears lazily. It was okeh with him.

LINK SANDERSON rode directly back to the Quarter Circle S Ranch where he selected a fresh mount, saddled, and then went up to the ranch

house. He filled a couple of canteens, stuffed a pair of saddle bags with food and rolled up a blanket.

With this meager outfit, plus a booted Winchester rifle, he went back to his horse and strapped the equipment to his saddle. As he finished, his father came over from beyond the bunkhouse where he had been superintending the resetting of the tires on the round-up chuck wagon.

"Where yuh haidin', Link?" he asked, noting the blanket and saddle bags.

"Down Buckeye way," was the answer. "Be gone for a couple of days, I reckon."

"What's doin' there?"

"Don't know yet, but I expect a-plenty. Located fourteen of our brands that had been run to a Bar C 88 this mornin'."

"What!" The word was a stentorian roar that could have been heard half a mile away. "Fourteen! Goddlemighty! Yuh jest forget about Buckeye. We'll get the boys together an' go over an' clean out that Bar C 88 crowd to the last man. Fourteen, yuh say? Why—why—"

Eagle Sanderson began to sputter aimlessly, so great was his anger. Link smiled grimly and waited until his father had calmed down a trifle.

"We'll leave Coburn an' his crowd alone for a while," he drawled finally. "We don't want to fly off the handle jest yet. Lord only knows how many more of our brands they've altered. That's what I aim to find out. Besides that, I'm convinced they've been lootin' the Bar C 88 ever since Bert Mannering died." And Link proceeded to tell his father his and Loma's suspicions.

"As I see it," he continued, "Coburn's been jugglin' the figgers he's furnished Judge Reynolds with, while drivin' the Bar C 88 herd out bit by bit an' sellin' 'em somewhere. Shore, he couldn't have brought 'em out through Thunder City an' the pass down to Healy like Bert Mannering used to do an' like we do. That'd been a daid give-away.

"There's only one other way he could have moved an' disposed of them. That's by way of Buckeye. So I'm goin' down to Buckeye to see what I can find out. When I get back I expect to be loaded with enough dynamite to blow Coburn an' his gang sky-high."

Eagle Sanderson thought this over for a moment, glowering at the ground. He nodded slowly. "That's sound reasonin'," he admitted. "I reckon he wouldn't have a heap of trouble gettin' rid of 'em in that country. But be careful, son. Keep yore tracks covered. An' don't ride the tops of any ridges."

"Don't worry; I won't, Dad. *Adios.*"

They shook hands and Link rode away. He headed directly south, straight for the tableland that separated the timber-clad range and the Durango Desert. Reaching this, he turned east and set his mount to that steady, shuffling, ground-eating jog which covers an amazing amount of country without undue fatigue to either horse or rider. He made a dry camp that night, and long before daylight he was up again.

Eastward he kept heading, skirting the neutral zone between the desert and the Cobalts. With the rising of the sun he became interested in the ground he was traversing. Almost immediately he murmured in satisfaction. The sandy earth showed indubitable signs of the passage of considerable herds of cattle. There was no really fresh sign, nothing that wasn't at least two weeks old. But Link was satisfied.

Just before noon the country began to change. The desert was pushed back farther and farther to the south and west by a stretch of rolling, well grassed terrain, across which Link began to see scattered herds of stock. He passed these closely, studied the brands, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. The two most in evidence were a Wineglass and a Rafter O.

Ahead showed a low, twisting line of scrub willow beside a welcome pool of water. Link unsaddled for an hour, allowing his mount the luxury of a good drink, a roll and a feed of grass. For

himself he munched a cold flapjack or two.

About mid-afternoon he struck the town of Buckeye. It was a ramshackle, raw-boarded sort of place, spraddled around a single dusty street. Link halted and dismounted at a building before which several saddle animals were tethered. A sign over the door identified the place as being the "Sunset Saloon."

Link entered casually, leaned on the bar and had a glass of none too cold beer. While he drank this he looked around. Five men sat at a card table, engrossed in draw poker.

One of them, dressed in store clothes, with a pallid, sphinx-like face, Link identified as a professional gambler. The other four were riders, clad in range togs. One of these four was patently younger than the others—a boy of little more than twenty, so Link judged. Also, in addition to being young, this player was far from sober.

Not a bad-looking youngster, Link decided, with his smooth, brown cheeks, curly yellow hair and blue eyes—eyes that were hot and bloodshot now, though. His mouth and chin were not as much weak as they were wilful.

The young rider had just lost another pot, which the gambler was impassively raking in. The boy swore, reaching down in his jeans for more money.

"Damn it!" he growled, his voice thick from the liquor he had imbibed. "Ain't there a hand I can hold that'll win? I had a queen high straight that time an' it wasn't worth shucks. Smythe, yuh shore yo're dealin' 'em straight up?"

At this Link saw the gambler stiffen, while he stared at the boy with cold, unwinking eyes. His right hand started stealing inside the left flap of his black coat. Link dropped his hand to his own gun and was about to say something, when the player next to Smythe, a coarse-featured, dark-browed individual, jabbed the gambler with his elbow.

"Forget it," he growled, with what was meant for a conciliatory smile. "Don't pay no attention to Johnny. He's jest kid enough to say more than he means. Besides, it's the liquor in him talkin'. An' his luck has been lousy. He ain't won a single pot. Me, I'd be sore, too. But his luck'll change pretty quick. Deal 'em up, Pasco."

Link, watching closely, saw the speaker's left eyelid droop ever so little, and the gambler relaxed. "Okeh," he said thinly. "But don't make any more cracks like that, Bidwell. I deal cards on the square."

The tension died away and the game went on. Link turned to see the bartender, a fat, red-faced, sulky-looking sort, eyeing him speculatively. Link laughed softly.

"Seemed for a minute like there mighta been fireworks," he drawled.

'An' a lot of 'em would have been comin' yore way, amigo, had yuh gone ahaid an' butted in like yuh made the move to do," grunted the dispenser of drinks. "Yo're a stranger, so I'll give yuh a little tip. Buckeye is one hell of a good town to mind yore own business in."

A chill spark came into Link's clear, gray eyes, though his smile still lingered. "So-o? Mebbe yo're right," he protested mildly. "But the kid is half drunk. An' I never did cotton to seein' somebody sneak a gun on a half-drunk kid. Least of all some tinhorn gambler. Don't worry yoreself over me, feller. I cut my eye-teeth quite some time back."

The bartender, chilled clear to his heels by that spark in Link's eye, subsided and began polishing glasses industriously. Link hitched up his belt and strolled over to the card table, standing behind the boy's chair.

The boy looked up, met Link's friendly grin, and smiled in return. "Hi, stranger," he greeted. "Stick right where yuh are, will yuh? Mebbe yuh'll change my luck. Which it shore could stand."

"Mebbe I will," nodded Link. "I'll give yuh all the moral support I got."

That this arrangement was not entirely suitable to the other players,

showed in the scowls they bent upon Link, but he paid no attention to them as he rolled and lighted a casual cigarette. The game went on, and as it progressed Link's eyes grew colder and colder, while his face took on that peculiar hawkish ruthlessness that Loma Carlyle had so often noted.

There was a reason for it. Link was boiling inside, for he was witnessing the most bare-faced piece of crooked sharping he had ever run across. The other four players were plainly in cahoots, and the boy was the victim. They were robbing him blind.

Link Sanderson was old enough and wise enough in the ways of the cattle country to know that minding one's own business is generally the safest course. But he possessed certain codes that ruled him sternly. One of those codes was being violated right now and he was determined, whatever the outcome might be, to assert himself.

Smythe, the gambler, had just dealt. The boy picked up his hand, squinted at it and tried to hide his exultation. The pot was opened by the man on Smythe's left, the coarse-featured fellow, and was jumped in turn by the other two. The boy kicked it again.

"You fellers are gonna have to pay to see this hand," he grinned foolishly.

Smythe and the next two saw the raise. The man on the boy's right saw it and raised again. The boy met the raise and kicked it once more. "I'm loaded this time," he warned.

The others scowled, but met the raise.

"Cards," snapped Smythe.

The boy looked up at Link, showing his hand. "They're gonna get a spurrin' this time—what?" he grinned.

Link nodded thoughtfully. "They will if yuh draw right," he drawled, looking hard at the boy's blue eyes. "I wouldn't bob to that ace. It never pays. Draw two, is my advice."

The boy stared at Link blankly, for the hand he held was a full house, kings on sixes. There was no sign of an ace in it. But suddenly, far back in those blue orbs, a glimmer of understanding showed. He nodded.

"Reckon yo're right, amigo. I was gonna bob that ace. But I'll try yore advice this time. My judgment seems to have been rotten. Gimme two, Smythe."

He tossed the pair of sixes into the discard. Smythe hesitated, and Link smiled grimly. The gambler met Link's glance. "If yo're so anxious to have a say about this game, feller," he rasped, "why don't yuh buy chips an' sit in?"

"If I did, that stack in front of yuh would get smaller fast," retorted Link easily. "Go ahaid—the kid asked for two. Give 'em to him."

Smythe licked his lips, fumbled at the cards and flicked out two of the pasteboards.

"Don't pick 'em up, kid," snapped Link sharply, his gray eyes boring at the gambler. "Give him two more—off the top this time."

The ensuing stillness could have been cut with a knife. Smythe looked murderous. "Yuh didn't figger the kid would draw, did yuh, Smythe," murmured Link softly. "Yuh knew he had a pat full house. Yuh gave it to him a-purpose. But his drawin' two upsets yore own hand. Them two would have given yuh fours, enough to have beat the pat hand yuh dealt him. So yuh tried to slip him two off the bottom. He don't want them. He wants top cyards. Give 'em to him!"

The last words cracked like a whip, and Smythe, cursing thickly, did as he was bid. His own hand he threw into the discard. "I thought this was a fair, open game of poker," he sneered. "But it looks like a hold-up."

"Right both times," barked Link. "The kid thought it was a square game, but it wasn't. It was a hold-up, with you engineerin' things an' the rest of these coyotes helpin' out yore dirty play."

The next moment was furious, brutal action! Smythe's hand licked under his coat, like the head of a striking snake. It came out, filled with blue, cold metal. As it appeared, Link's own gun lashed

up and down in a flashing arc. The heavy barrel landed crushingly across Smythe's face, breaking his nose and beating him to the floor in a senseless heap.

The coarse-featured man, Hancock, was about to shoot when Link drove a slug through his right shoulder and he toppled to the floor, mouthing epithets. The other two, Pasco and Jardine, spun out of their chairs, snatching guns.

For the first stunning moment, the boy had sat still, his liquor-dazed brain refusing to work. But now he lurched to his feet, fumbling at his belt. Link, poised and ready, saw Pasco pulling down squarely on the boy's heart, and he threw a slug with lightning swiftness.

It was a center shot, cutting the fellow down in his tracks. Pasco spun as he fell, instinctively shooting. The lance of flame from his gun almost seared Jardine's face and that worthy went down with him, a blank, empty look on his face, a bullet hole just under his right eye. Then Link whirled towards the bar.

"Drop it!" he barked.

The bartender dropped the sawed-off shotgun of awesome bore that he had caught up from under the bar.

"Gawd!" gasped that worthy. "Don't shoot—don't shoot! I'm peaceable."

"Yo're a yellow-backed liar an' a coward," bit out Link. "Put yore paws on the bar an' keep 'em there."

Silence fell, except for the groaning of the coarse-featured rider whose shoulder Link had smashed. The others were still. The boy coughed in the swirling gunsmoke. He looked at Link, cold sober.

"I reckon I owe yuh one, pardner," he mumbled. "They'd have got me shore. Pasco was holdin' daid on when yuh plugged him."

Link nodded crisply. "Yeah, yuh owe me one. I'll exact payment later. Jest now we got other things to think about. How much did yuh lose in that crooked game?"

"I dunno, exactly. Mebbe two hundred bucks."

"Take that much off that tinhorn cyard sharp. Hurry up! Then we'll be movin'. Things are liable to be hot here in another minute or two."

The boy fumbled over the senseless gambler, then stood up. "This'll do," he gulped. "Let's go."

They left the saloon and got their horses. Several men were approaching the place. "Yuh lead," snapped Link. "An' step on it!"

The boy lit out at a pounding gallop, with Link at his heels. Shouts followed them, then a few shots that flew wild. In another moment they were outside of town, riding north.

Link spurred alongside. "Where yuh haidin'?" he shouted.

"Home," answered the boy. "Out to the Wineglass, about seven miles from here. My dad owns it."

There was no pursuit, at least no immediate one. But Link felt that he'd hear about the affair later. Thinking things over now, he was somewhat disgusted in getting mixed up in such a scrape. After all, perhaps he should have let the sharpers fleece the kid and teach him a lesson. He felt that his own mission in the country would now be much more difficult to perform. But he shrugged his shoulders. The kid was a likable sort.

CHAPTER VI

Colinga Tries His Luck

THE Wineglass spread lay in a big basin along the foot of the Cobalt Range and looked to Link, as he and his companion drew up to it, to be a prosperous, thriftily run outfit.

As they pounded to a stop before the comfortable ranch house, a middle-aged man and woman stepped out onto the porch. The woman had a gentle, motherly face, kindly and serene. The man was of medium size, rather stout, with a square, blocky face, the fighting lines of which Link immediately noted and liked.

"What's all the rush, Johnny?" demanded the man, looking Link over keenly. "An' who's yore friend?"

Realizing that the boy did not know his name, Link spoke up. "I'm Link Sanderson from up Thunder City way. Me an' Johnny met in town, an' he invited me out."

"Yuh a son of ole Eagle Sanderson?"

Link nodded. "That's right."

The man beamed. "Shore, I'm glad to meet yuh. I've heard of yore daddy an' he sounds like my idee of a man. I'm Bart Bidwell an' this is my wife. How come you an' Johnny picked up as friends?"

Johnny would have blurted out the whole story then and there, had not Link stopped him with a warning glance. "Oh, jest one of those things," drawled Link. "We got to talkin'. Missis Bidwell, I'm happy to know yuh, ma'am."

Mrs. Bidwell smiled and Link fell in love with her on the spot. "You'll stay for supper, of course," she said.

"Which invite I hail an' accept with delight, ma'am. An' thank yuh. Johnny, what say we put the hosses up?"

As he said this, Link caught Bart Bidwell's eye and gave him a light nod. Then he started off for the corrals, leading his bronc. Bart Bidwell walked along with him, while a scared and doubtful-looking Johnny brought up the rear.

As soon as they were out of earshot of the house, Link turned to Bidwell. "Things happened in town," he said gravely. "Serious things. I didn't want the missis to have to hear about it. A couple of jaspers got rocked off, a third's got a smashed shoulder and a tinhorn gambler named Smythe has got his face pounded in with a gun barrel. Johnny an' me were sorta in the mix-up."

Bidwell whirled on his son. "So yuh were playin' cyards ag'in with Smythe an' that crowd, eh? Thought I told yuh not to! Now yuh see what it's led to? But of course the ole man didn't know nothin'."

Johnny's head came up and he looked his father straight in the eye. "Go ahaid, Dad," he said simply. "Rawhide me a-plenty. I got it comin'." And the lad proceeded to tell what had happened.

Bidwell stared at the boy, whose eyes did not quail, but met his own fearlessly. Link laid his hand on Bidwell's arm. "Don't say it, sir," he drawled. "Johnny made a fool of himself—an' knows it. I figger he learned a good lesson—one he won't forget. How about it, Johnny?"

"Yo're right, Link," said the boy quietly. "I'm done. Cyards an' likker are things I've shore forgot, from now on. I mean that."

Bart Bidwell relaxed. "Well, that's somethin'," he growled. "Shake, Sanderson. Me an' the missis are owin' yuh plenty, sounds like. Yuh made one mistake. Yuh shoulda killed Hancock, too. Pasco was a rat an' Jardine his pardner. Smythe is a slick crook. But I'm afraid yo're liable to have a little trouble over it."

"Guess I'll manage to bear up," said Link dryly. "Shore, I'm sorry I had to throw lead. It ain't exactly in my line. But things developed sorta fast an' got away from me. I'd figgered on runnin' a whizzer. But it didn't work out. Anyway, it's done now an' no use cryin' over it. But I've got a story to tell yuh an' some questions to ask that yuh might help me with, if yuh don't mind."

"After what yuh've done for Johnny?" growled Bidwell. "Hell! Anything I got is yores, Sanderson. C'mon up to my office an' have a drink. Johnny, yuh go clean yoreself up an' have a snooze to get rid of the likker. Yuh got a couple of hours before supper."

Over a small glass of whiskey, Link outlined to Bart Bidwell the purpose of his visit into the Buckeye country. Bidwell listened carefully and thoughtfully, his eyes squinted, his blocky jaw

set. When Link finished, the rancher nodded.

"Yuh come to the right place for information, Sanderson. To my knowledge, Pete Hancock has bought two sizable herds of Bar C 88 stock. It was reasonable an' didn't strike any of the rest of us in this country as bein' off-color deals, so I didn't pay much attention."

"What brand does Hancock run?" asked Link.

"The Lazy H. His range is east, some ten miles from here. He's less than a dozen miles from Splitrock, on the A. M. & Southern Railroad. Splitrock is the shippin' point for all us fellers around here. I reckon that's a point that interests yuh?"

"Plenty," said Link. "What kind of a reputation has Hancock got?"

"Nothin' to brag about. Jest figger out yore own reactions to him, now that yuh know who he is, an' yuh won't be far wrong. He ain't got caught at nothin' crooked yet, but we keep an eye on him."

"Then yuh wouldn't put it past him to buy rustled stock?"

"No, I wouldn't. If there's a dollar to be made easy, Pete Hancock will go after it, an' his morals won't trouble him a bit. Him an' me don't get along nohow, an' he's been takin' out a lot of his spleen against me by gettin' Johnny to drinkin' an' gamblin'."

"This Pasco an' Jardine—who were they?"

"Couple of Hancock's riders. I'm tellin' yuh again—no loss."

Link was silent for a time, thinking. He nodded slowly. "I reckon I got the story. Deuce Coburn made a deal with Hancock. He's been drivin' Bar C 88 stock onto Hancock's range, ventin' the brand an' shippin' from Splitrock. Then they divvy up, Hancock gettin' so much cut for the use of his iron. Well, I reckon I can figger out a way to put the crusher on 'em. I want to catch Coburn with the goods on him, if I can. Here's my idee. See what yuh think of it."

Link talked for some time again, with Bidwell listening closely. Bidwell agreed. "I'll do it, but I won't take a cent of pay for it. My boys will be plumb tickled at the chance of a scrap. They been gettin' restless because life has been so quiet lately.

"You jest send word when yuh figger the time is right an' we'll be on the job. An' in the meantime, I'll send a rider down to Splitrock to make some inquiries. I'll let yuh know what he finds out. When'll yuh be haidin' for home?"

"Soon as it gets dark. There'll probably be a fuss raised over that ruckus in Buckeye an' the sooner I get on my way, the better. If they try an' put any blame on Johnny, give 'em the laugh. The kid didn't throw a single shot—but he was goin' to. He's game, all right."

Two hours later Link ate supper with the Bidwells, bade them good-by and went out to his horse, which had rested and fed. Johnny went with him. As Link swung into the saddle, he looked down at the boy.

"Back in Buckeye, after that mix-up, yuh said yuh owed me one, Johnny. I agreed with yuh an' said I'd exact payment later. I'm gonna take that pay now. I want yore promise as a man an' a friend, that yuh'll leave the likker an' cyards alone—from now on. Remember—on the up an' up yo're to behave yoreself. Savvy?"

"Yuh heard what I told Dad," said the boy. "I meant it. I'm done."

Link leaned over swiftly, with outstretched hand and gleaming smile. "Good kid. We'll shake on that."

THINGS were quiet and, on the surface, amicable enough around the Bar C 88 headquarters. Loma Carlyle, with true feminine ardor and an eye for beauty, called on Aunt Molly Downs for advice and suggestions and began outlining plans for beautifying the house. They discussed window curtains, some new pieces of furniture and a rug or two.

Loma got out pencil and paper and began making a list of the necessary purchases. Finished with plans for the interior, she turned her attention to the out-of-doors and visualized some beds of flowers.

These satisfactorily outlined, she called on Deuce Coburn and told him of her wishes. In turn, Coburn set his men to work with pick and shovel and superintended matters himself in throwing up a small dam on the creek above the house, then ditching water for irrigation down to where the flowers would be.

On the morning of the second day after Loma's meeting with Link, a rider came cantering up to the place, bearing a message from Judge Reynolds that all the necessary legal papers were drawn up and in readiness for her signature. So Loma decided to go to town immediately.

Mrs. Downs concluded to end her visit for the time, convinced that Loma had nothing to fear, for Coburn and his men were treating her with the utmost respect. So the two women rode away together.

Loma's business with the judge was soon concluded. "It is all yours now, Miss Carlyle," said the judge, handing the papers over to her. "And here is your uncle's bank book. It shows a balance of around thirty thousand dollars in the bank at Healy. I've taken all the necessary steps with Jacobs, the bank president, and you may draw on that balance at any time now."

Loma was amazed and breathless at this news. "Why—why, that's a fortune," she stammered. "I had no idea—"

Reynolds laughed. "You rate as a pretty wealthy individual, my dear," he beamed. "What with your ranch and that bank balance, you are more or less fixed for life."

There was nothing in stock at the store that satisfied Loma's taste in window curtains or furniture, so she sent through an order for what she needed, as well as a wide miscellany of flower seeds, bulbs, roots and rose cuttings.

She stopped in at the Downs' cabin, and had dinner with Molly and her husband, Jim—a kindly, powerful man with the great, corded forearms of his blacksmith trade. After exacting a promise from Mrs. Downs to come and visit her again shortly, Loma galloped out of town.

A great happiness surged through the girl as she rode homeward. Her inheritance was vastly greater than she had surmised, and she blessed the old ranchman who had willed his estate to the orphaned daughter of a younger sister. She regretted that she had not known Bert Mannering better. In addition to all this, Loma knew a subtle thrill at the realization that she would shortly be seeing Link Sanderson again.

She was too inherently honest to try and bluff herself concerning the strange feeling she had towards Link. Her past life had been a very stern and busy one, with the first consideration always before her of digging a living out of the world for herself. Her mother had died when Loma was very young and her father, a mining engineer, had been killed in a cave-in when she was fifteen, leaving her with practically nothing.

Loma had worked hard, fitting herself to earn her own living, and had had no time for romance. She had met her share of men, men who had offered their attentions, but none of them had moved her in any way.

With Link it was different. From the first he had intrigued, stirred her. He was at once a clean-cut, stalwart gentleman, yet so starkly a rugged, fearless man. Loma's eyes brightened and her cheeks flushed slightly at mere thought of him.

On the point from which both of the valleys were visible, Loma reined in, looking down across the Sanderson range. Immediately she picked out a rider down there, working slowly through the scattered, grazing cattle. She had a pair of field-glasses with her, which she had found in the house, that had evidently belonged to her uncle. By the aid of these she quickly identified

the rider as old Eagle Sanderson.

As she watched him, the thought came to her that Link would look like that some day. Erect, grizzled, poised—a man upon whom the years would rest lightly. Again she colored and she laughed to herself with secret delight.

Unconsciously her glasses swept here and there, coming to rest finally on an opening in the timber on the ridge that divided the valleys. Immediately she stiffened. She saw another rider down there, just in the act of dismounting. She saw him hit the ground, draw a rifle from the saddle boot, then turn and move off towards the edge of the timber in a line that would bring him within two hundred yards of where Eagle Sanderson was riding.

Loma's identification of this second rider was immediate—that short, wide figure with the long, dangling arms, the bowed legs and strange, simian walk. Joe Colinga!

As surely as she knew her own name, Loma guessed the import of the situation. Colinga, hating the Sandersons with blind, feral fury, was going to dry-gulch Eagle Sanderson! Colinga was that sort—a killer without honor, or conscience or sense of shame. Link had told her that he was positive Colinga and Glick were the two men who had murdered Long Andy. Certainly that had been ruthless and cold-blooded enough. And now. . . .

Loma wasted no further time in thought. She wielded a hefty quirt on the amazed Buck and went racing towards the valley. She did not follow the winding trail. Instead she surged straight down the steep slope, crouching low in the saddle to keep from being swept from her seat by the clawing brush thickets.

Eagle Sanderson had been about half a mile distant when she first saw him, moving slowly up the valley. Perhaps six hundred yards now separated him from Loma, but this seemed like miles to the anxious girl. With a final snort and a crash, Buck plunged clear of the witch hopples and quaking asp, and raced into the open bosom of the valley. Loma caught a little gasp of relief as she saw that the old ranchman was still in his saddle, unsuspecting and at ease.

Yet, at that very moment the flat crash of a rifle echoed. Eagle Sanderson jerked sideways before some invisible force, and slithered to the ground. His horse, well trained and faithful, spun a few steps to one side and stopped, head upthrown, ears pricked towards the point from which the shot came.

Instinctively, Loma reined in. To go racing up to the fallen man now would invite a shot at herself, and there was nothing she could do for Eagle Sanderson. A movement showed at the edge of the timber, off there in the hostile distance.

Joe Colinga appeared, walking steadily forward, callously levering in another shell. At first Loma could not understand this move. Then she realized what Colinga was about. He was going up to his victim to make sure. And so intent was he, it was quite apparent that he had not noted her appearance.

Loma's first thought was to race straight for him, to ride in blind defense of the fallen man. But this changed immediately as she saw Colinga stop, level his rifle and shoot again. She saw the bullet, striking high, kick up dust just beyond Eagle Sanderson's outstretched figure.

Wild fury coursed through her. It was the most brutal, cold-blooded thing she had ever seen. Colinga was going to drive more lead into the motionless ranchman—going to make absolutely sure.

Loma swung to the ground, dragged out her own rifle and ran a little apart from her bronco. There she dropped to one knee and swung the rifle into line. Colinga was walking forward again. He stopped, throwing up his gun. Holding a coarse bead, Loma pulled the trigger.

She was astounded at the success of her effort. Colinga went down like a pole-axed bull. And to Loma's further amazement, Eagle Sanderson stirred and crawled slowly to his feet, where he stood swaying.

Loma ran back to the buckskin, swung into the saddle, and raced up. Eagle Sanderson watched her come, his grim face set in a mask of pain. His left arm hung queerly limp and there was a red stain, spreading on his shirt, over his left shoulder.

Loma set Buck to a rearing halt, slid to the ground and ran up to the old ranchman. "Mr. Sanderson," she cried. "Thank God! He—he didn't kill you after all."

Despite his weakness and pain, Eagle Sanderson smiled grimly. "No, lass," he growled. "Thanks to you, he didn't. I've got a lot to apologize to yuh for. Yo're true blue—an' a grand youngster."

Loma colored at his praise. She got a canteen from her saddle and stepped close to him. "Sit down," she ordered. "That shoulder needs some emergency work. When I get a bandage on it I'll get you home."

"Let that wait," said the grim old fellow. "First, I'm gonna take a look to make shore that buzzard of a Colinga is safe. He's either daid as a mackerel or jest creased. Yuh shot a little high. I could see where the bullet cut dust out beyond him. Loan me yore shoulder."

Loma did better than that. She lifted his sound arm about her neck, encircled his torso with her own left arm and put all of her lithe, splendid young strength in supporting the ranchman as he stumbled slowly forward to where Colinga lay.

"Thought so," grunted Eagle. "He ain't daid. Yuh creased him over the ear. Lucky we looked at him. He'll come outa this in a hurry. Go get my rope."

Loma, thankful in her heart that she had not killed the renegade, sped away and soon returned with Eagle's riata. "Tie him up," came the order. "I'll show yuh how."

Colinga's wound was little more than a burn above his left ear, but there had been enough shock to the bullet to knock him out momentarily. Already he was beginning to stir slightly. But Loma, under advice from Eagle Sanderson, worked with expert speed. Half hitches were thrown and drawn tight. And when Colinga's reptilian eyes flickered and opened, and he made his first effort towards freedom, Loma saw that her work was good. The murderous killer was trussed securely.

Colinga began to curse. Sanderson turned away. "Come, lass, we'll be goin' now. I'll send some of the boys up after him."

Back at the horses, Loma insisted on bathing and bandaging the ranchman's shoulder. Her own silk neckerchief formed the bandage. Then she helped him into his saddle and rode close beside him, ready to give him the support of her arm again, if it were needed.

Grim old wolf that he was, Eagle Sanderson stuck it out until the Quarter Circle S was reached. But here, Sleepy Burch hurried out just in time to catch his boss as the old fellow fainted.

Sleepy's wild yell brought three other riders. "Get him to bed," ordered Loma. "It's serious, but hardly fatal. The bullet went completely through. He's lost quite a bit of blood, though."

When their boss was safely between blankets, the riders turned on Loma as one man. "Who did it—an' how?" demanded Sleepy.

"Joe Colinga," answered Loma. She went on to give a brief description of what had happened. "Colinga should still be there," she ended. "Mr. Sanderson said he would send you boys after him. While you're about it you'd better have someone go to town for a doctor. I'll stay and do what I can."

"We'll get the doc," promised Sleepy, with a meaning glance at the other riders. "An' we'll get Colinga, too. C'mon, gang."

CHAPTER VII

A Midnight Sortie

LINK SANDERSON arrived at the Quarter Circle S just after sunup the following morning. Lines of fatigue were carven about his mouth and nostrils, but his eyes, though sunken slightly, still gleamed with their old, clear light of virility. Sleepy Burch met him at the corrals.

"Hell's been poppin'," said Sleepy succinctly. "Joe Colinga tried to dry-gulch the ole man."

Link stiffened. "Tried, yuh say," he barked harshly. "How'd it happen?"

Sleepy went into enthusiastic detail. When he finished, Link smiled dreamily. "That girl is a wonder, Sleepy."

"Yo're dang whistlin' she is," declared Sleepy vehemently. "Her an' Eagle are thicker'n blazes already. I was in last night after the boss came to an' he made her sit next to him an' let him hold her hand. Wished I had a slug through me," he mourned lugubriously.

Link laughed. "Where'd yuh put Colinga, Sleepy? I'm gonna have a talk with that jasper right now."

Sleepy's eyes grew evasive and he scuffed the ground with a boot heel. "Well, yuh see, Link—us fellers were sorta hot by the time we got to him an' we got to arguin' what we should do. An' yuh know"—here he looked up and grinned—"somewhere in that argument, danged if Colinga didn't get hung. Yes-sir, he got strung up to a good stout limb. O' course we felt sorry, after it was all over—but accidents do happen."

"Sleepy, yo're right," declared Link solemnly. "Accidents do happen. An' sometimes they sorta clear the air. Tell the boys thanks—for me. Now I reckon I better take a look at Dad."

Link found his father partaking of a little nourishment at the hands of Loma Carlyle. At sight of Link, Loma's cheeks burned slightly, but she managed a very manner-of-fact greeting.

"Your father had a little accident," she said quietly. "But he's doing fine."

Eagle smiled grimly at his son. "Don't let her steer yuh off the track, Link," he rumbled. "I'd been plenty daid if it hadn't been for her."

"So Sleepy jest told me," drawled Link, smiling unspoken thanks at Loma. "An' I hear that yuh two are high old tillikums."

Eagle chuckled. "Yo're doggone right. If I was twenty years younger I'd marry that girl, if I had to steal her to get her. But we understand each other, don't we, lass?"

Loma smiled down at the old fellow. "We understand each other very well. By the way, what did your riders do with Colinga?"

Link busied himself with a cigarette. "Put him away for safe-keepin'," he parried. "Well, Dad, I'm shore happy that Colinga didn't hold plumb center. As it is yo're gonna miss a lot of fun."

"Yuh mean yuh've located somethin'?" demanded Eagle quickly.

Link nodded. "Plenty. Jest about as we figgered. I'm gonna engineer a set-up that'll put a finish to the whole business. So don't go to frothin' an' foamin' an' agitatin' yoreself. Jest take things easy an' get well. In the meantime, I'll attend to Mister Deuce Coburn an' his crowd."

"How yuh gonna do it?" persisted Eagle.

"Never mind. Yuh quit worryin' about it. Yuh had yore breakfast yet, Miss Carlyle?"

Loma shook her head.

"Then we'll eat together. I'm gaunt as a wolf."

Over their breakfast, Loma surveyed Link critically. "You are not only hungry, but you look awfully weary," she observed. "I recommend about twelve hours sleep for you."

"I could stand it," admitted Link. "But I want to take this opportunity of thankin' yuh for what yuh did for Dad."

"We are neighbors, aren't we?" retorted Loma lightly. "We should do favors for each other. Goodness knows, you are doing plenty for me. Your entire trip has been more for my interests

than for your own. So say no more about it."

"Okeh," grinned Link. "But that ain't gonna keep me from doin' a lot of thinkin'. I been doin' a lot of that anyhow," he added meaningly.

Loma could not meet his eyes. Her own glance fell to her plate and the color mounted higher in her cheeks. She pushed back her chair and stood up. "I'll be getting along home now. Your father is resting easily. The doctor will be out from town again this afternoon to change the dressing on the wound, and after that I'll come over and renew it when necessary."

"Yo're very, very capable," said Link softly. "I never knew there were women like yuh."

Her laugh was a trifle shaky. "I'm very ordinary, really. It just happens that part of my preparation for being a frontier school teacher entailed some knowledge of emergency nursing. I wonder if you'd have my pony saddled?"

"I'll do it myself," said Link. "An' I'll ride home with yuh. After that mix-up with Colinga I don't like to have yuh ridin' the range alone."

"No!" protested Loma emphatically. "There's no need of that. You get some sleep. If you really insist on having someone accompany me, let one of your riders go—Sleepy, for instance. He's very nice," she finished mischievously.

"He better be," growled Link. "I'll cuff his ears if he ain't. Okeh, I'll tell him."

SLEEPY BURCH was more than glad to oblige and, after seeing Loma safely to her own ranch, turned regretfully homeward. Sleepy was still young enough to know the charm of romance and, while he realized perfectly that any dreams he had on the subject were entirely hopeless, he found a mournful pleasure in being in the company of this astounding girl.

"A gal like her shore revives a man's faith," muttered Sleepy, as he jogged back along the home trail.

To Loma's surprise, the Bar C 88 was apparently deserted on her return. There was no sign of life anywhere. At first a vague fear filled her, so she investigated thoroughly, even to the extent of invading the bunkhouse. Here she found her fears allayed, for the place was jammed with personal belongings and equipment. Evidently Coburn and the other riders were merely off on some job about the ranch.

She went back to the house and realized she was very weary herself, for she had slept but little the previous night. This lack of rest, coupled with the strain and excitement of the shooting affray, had sapped her strength. So she luxuriated in a hot bath, then went to bed.

It was dusk when she awakened, greatly refreshed. While she was dressing, she heard the clatter and pound of hoofs. Looking out of a window, she saw Coburn and the others, just riding in from the southern part of the valley.

She cooked and ate a solitary supper and was just finishing when a knock sounded on the door. She opened it to admit Coburn.

"Evenin', Miss Carlyle," he greeted. "Saw yore hoss in the corrals, so I knew yuh'd got back from yore visit to town. I jest wanted to report. I've had the boys busy all day getting things ready for the spring round-up. We been combin' the timber an' gettin' what stock we could out in the open.

"I took the liberty of sendin' a couple of the gang into town for a few pack loads of supplies. We'll start the round-up proper in the mornin'. Shore, but it's been a good winter for the stock. I never saw a herd in better shape. An' the increase is 'way above normal."

Loma Carlyle, in addition to her other gifts, was a passably good actress. Therefore she showed no sign of her real thoughts. She expressed gratification at the news, but her thoughts were along a line that would have amazed the glib, self-satisfied foreman.

She was drawing a mental comparison between Link Sanderson and this fellow. They were as wide apart as the

poles, she concluded. With Link, honor and high purpose were the very essential things of existence. He was the sort who would speak the truth, if it meant hanging for it.

On the other hand, Deuce Coburn was nothing but a cheap, slick crook, stealing from the ranch that had paid his wages, sheltered and fed him. He knew neither honor, self-respect nor faith. The truth was not in him.

Loma roused from her period of thought to find Coburn staring at her fixedly, and there was a leer in his eyes that sent the hot color sweeping up her throat. She had donned a simple house dress of blue gingham, which unknowingly enhanced the marvelous color of her eyes and set off her vivid beauty amazingly. Had Coburn been but a single order lower on the animal scale, he would have licked his lips.

"It shore is easy to work for a boss like yuh," he muttered, with what was intended for an ingratiating look. "Most men would be plumb satisfied for a smile or two instead of wages."

"We won't discuss personalities, if you please," said Loma coldly. "You must be weary after your long day's work."

Thick-hided as he was, Coburn got the hint and, before the level, chill regard of Loma's glance, heeded it. His tone was surly as he growled a good night, but he left. Loma barred the door behind him.

She frowned with disgust. "You cheap, lying thief," she murmured. "I am continually amazed that a man of Judge Reynolds' type should be taken in by you the way he has. Thank goodness, Link Sanderson isn't like him."

Loma did not retire immediately. On the contrary, she had never felt more wide awake; nor for that matter, so vaguely uneasy. The night was so still, so brooding, and somehow threatening.

She went to a window overlooking the bunkhouse and corrals and sat there. She could see the lights of the bunkhouse and, from time to time, catch snatches of indistinct voices.

In the timber above the house, a coyote was yapping. Presently, from the ridge on the other side of the valley, another of the slinking brotherhood replied in kind, and the night echoed with the poignantly weird and wild sound. Far down the valley a cow bawled mournfully.

A terrible, stultifying loneliness gripped the girl. She could not understand it. She had not felt like this before. On all of that long, lone trip from Lee's Ferry, across the Wild-Horse Badlands and the Durango Desert, she had never known the slightest touch of loneliness. Yet here, secure in her own house, with a dozen riders within easy call, she was fairly aquiver with this foreign emotion.

The eastern rim of the world took on a burnished, silver tinge and presently the moon crept into view, round and cold and pure. It built intense shadows under the trees, but lit up the open spaces almost like day.

Through the stillness, Loma's ear caught the measured clump of a slowly moving horse. Her heart took a wild leap; perhaps it was Link. Immediately she knew better. Link would not be over tonight. But she smiled mistily. That sudden leap of her heart told her all too plainly, that, what she was halfway sure of before, was now a certainty. She was in love with Link Sanderson.

She forgot the approaching horse for a moment—a precious moment there in the moon-glow while the first, full glory of her emotion flowed over her. She clutched the thought avidly, hungrily, and her lips parted in strange ecstasy as she looked through wide, glorified eyes across the night to where Link Sanderson lay sleeping.

The sound of a coarse, whiskey voice jerked her back to stern realities. "Hey, Coburn!" came the call.

The bunkhouse door swung quickly open and Deuce Coburn stepped out.

"Who is it?" he rasped suspiciously.

"Me—Texas Jack. Send somebody to take care of my bronc. I'm daid

fagged. Jest got in from Buckeye. Pete Hancock sent me. I'm—"

"Shut up!" snarled Coburn. "Yuh must be drunk—bawlin' out things of that sort for the whole world to hear. Shut up—an' get inside!"

Texas Jack muttered a string of curses, but subsided. Loma saw him follow Coburn into the bunkhouse. A moment later another rider stepped out and led the newcomer's horse off towards the corrals.

For a long time, Loma was motionless. But her thoughts were racing. Texas Jack! She remembered him now as the drunken brute who had insulted her that first day in Thunder City, and whom Link Sanderson had punished for the insult with swift, ruthless savagery.

But what was he doing here now? And what news could he bear to Coburn, from Hancock of Buckeye?

Through her mind flitted the significance of what Link Sanderson had said to his father and to her. Hancock was the man who was in the deal with Coburn on the stolen cattle. This must have something to do with that phase of affairs. Again, Link had just returned from the Buckeye country. Perhaps his mission down there had been correctly guessed at.

Daring ideas pulsed through Loma. She wanted to hear what else Texas Jack had to tell Coburn. And there was just one way to do it. She ran to where her saddle bags hung, extracted her slim, but deadly .38 Colt, then slipped out-of-doors and poised in the shadows under the trees.

Here she waited until she saw the puncher return and enter the bunkhouse, the one who had taken care of Texas Jack's horse. Then, picking her way from shadow to shadow, she scurried down to the corrals. From the shelter of these she whisked across an open stretch, into the black shadow thrown by the bunkhouse.

There she halted, resting a moment for her breathing to become normal. Presently she inched along the wall towards a partially opened window. Just beside this she crouched, motionless, for the voices of the men inside were clear enough.

Texas Jack was speaking. "That damned Link Sanderson shore threw a jolt into things down in Buckeye. He butted into a game of cyards that Hancock was in. Hancock, a cyard sharp named Smythe, an' two of Hancock's riders were cleanin' out some kid. Smythe wasn't slick enough with the pasteboards to fool Sanderson an' Sanderson called him. Guess he got purty rough.

"Anyhow, when the ruckus was over, Smythe had his face pushed in from a gun barrel, Hancock was crippled an' his two riders daid. Naturally, Hancock is plenty sore. He wants Sanderson's scalp an' says he'll pay plenty for it. But he guessed what Sanderson might be down there for, an' he sent me up here to warn yuh to watch yoreself."

"Pete Hancock ain't guessed anythin' I didn't know," came Coburn's answer. "Things are gettin' too tight around here for comfort. So me an' the boys figgered to make one last big drive—a drive that'll clean this damn ranch from one end to the other. We were out all day long today combin' the timber an' concentratin' the stock in the lower end of the valley.

"Tomorrow, on the bluff of startin' round-up, we'll pick up everything else we can, includin' all the Quarter Circle S stuff we can get our hands on. An' tomorrow night we light out. By mornin' we'll be a long way towards Buckeye and, by the time these thick-haids around here wake up to what's happened, we'll be safe on Hancock's range. What d'yuh think of it?"

Texas Jack seemed to be considering. "Well," he said slowly, "I'd say it might work all right, if the Sandersons were out of the way. This lone female boss of yores don't amount to a whoop, o' course, as far as puttin' up a fight is concerned. But them damned Sandersons. . . ."

Coburn laughed brutally. "Forget the Sandersons. I got Joe Colinga out

lookin' for them. Joe's got a little grub an' a blanket an' he's jest prowlin' around, waitin' his chance. Don't be surprised if yuh hear of one or both of the Sandersons bein' dry-gulched.

"Joe'll make a better man at that work than Spider Glick. Spider was too proud of himself. He felt nobody could beat him to the draw an' he liked to get his men at close range. Allus said he liked to see 'em kick. But his foot shore slipped on his last try. Joe's more patient. He'll get them buzzards, see if he don't."

Texas Jack cursed. "I'll shore buy him a drink if he does. An' say, I got an idee. Long as we're gonna clean this range of cattle tomorrow night, why not lug that gal along, too? The stuck-up little devil! I'd like a chance to tame her some."

A chorus of protest arose. "Nothin' doin'," came a voice that Loma recognized as belonging to Dopey. "We don't want no woman mixed in this. Cattle stealin' is bad enough, but woman stealin' is out. Yuh try that, an' I quit the whole game cold."

There were several additions to Dopey's promise by others, and Texas Jack subsided.

Loma waited to hear no more. What she had listened to set every outraged fiber of her body quivering with anger. Something indescribably savage pulsed through her at the moment. She felt that, given opportunity, she could have shot down the entire crowd of traitorous, thieving riders whom she had fondly believed for a short, fatuous period, to be toiling in her interests.

But she was too level-headed to waste time in useless regrets and futile anger. Action was imperative—intelligent action. Soft as a shadow she whisked away from the bunkhouse to the corrals, thence back to the ranch house. Here she swiftly changed to shirt and overalls and boots. Leaving a lone light burning in her room, she belted on her revolver, took her rifle from where it stood in a corner, and slipped out into the night once more.

This time she left on the opposite side from the bunkhouse, circled far below the corrals, then cut directly southwest across the valley. The world was still and rapturous beneath the silver sheen of the moon, and under ordinary circumstances, Loma would have been entranced by it, for in her, normally, lay a deep appreciation and response to the majesty of nature.

Tonight, however, she was coldly practical.

She welcomed the moonlight, merely because it made her progress easier. Straight across the valley she headed, aiming for the timber-shrouded ridge that separated her range from that of the Sandersons.

She had first thought of using a horse, but discarded the idea before the realization that to do so would entail a big risk of discovery. By going this way on foot, she had little fear of detection.

In her lungs the crisp night air burned —pure and cold and energizing. The night was magic, vital. The timbered ridge moved rapidly closer, before her quick, firm stride; then she was into it, and climbing.

It was dark under the towering trees, and her pace was, of necessity, slower. But she scorned to rest, driving steadily onward before the stimulation of need and the electric fountain of perfect health and strength. Underfoot lay a springy carpet of pine needles, and the moist night air was heavy with pungent, throat-tingling essence of balsam.

The long trek ended, under the cold, brilliant stars of early morning. The bulk of the ranch buildings of the Quarter Circle S rose before her, still and slumbering. Thoughtful of old Eagle Sanderson and his need of quiet and rest, she went to the bunkhouse. The door was open and through it drifted the sound of heavy breathing and subdued snores.

"Sleepy!" she called softly. "Sleepy Burch!"

There came a stir from inside, the click of a gun lock.

"Who is it?" sounded Sleepy's voice, hard and suspicious.

"Loma Carlyle. Hurry! I've got something to tell Link."

She smiled at Sleepy's murmured curse of utter amazement, and she heard the thump of his boots as he donned them. He stepped out of the doorway, tousled and disheveled from sleep and hurried dressing.

"You!" he exclaimed. "Miss Carlyle! Holy smokes! What's this all about, anyhow?"

"You can listen while I tell Link. Get him down here—quick!"

Sleepy headed for the main house at a clumsy run, still dizzy and befogged with sleep. Loma followed after him, slowly. By the time she reached the steps of the porch, Link emerged, with Sleepy at his heels.

Link's eyes seemed to flame in the darkness, and their contact sent Loma's heart to thudding. "What is it, Loma?" he asked tersely.

"Link, maybe you think I'm crazy, but I thought you should know immediately." Then she went on to tell of the arrival of Texas Jack at the Bar C 88 and of what she had overheard between him and Deuce Coburn.

Link listened intently. When she finished, she found that he had captured both of her hands and was pressing them tightly. "This is what I expected would happen—an' what I hoped for. It means that we'll catch 'em in the act, in our own time and way. An' by bringin' the news immediately yuh've jest guaranteed the success of my plan.

"Sometime—later—I'll tell yuh what I think of yore pluck and common sense, little lady. There never was another like yuh."

To still the thunder of her heart and cover her confusion, Loma spoke again. "Link, that lying cur of a Coburn set Joe Colinga after you and your father deliberately. Sent him out to dry-gulch you both. And he sent Spider Glick before Colinga. Oh, I know I should not feel this way. Maybe it is vicious and unwomanish, but I could see men like that wiped out of existence and never know a qualm of pity."

"I savvy," said Link quietly. "Yo're entitled to feel thataway. I don't think none the less of yuh for it. An' we'll take care of Mister Coburn in our own good time an' way. Sleepy"—and here his voice became crisp and forceful—"yuh got a long ride ahaid of yuh—startin' now.

"Grab yoreself a relay of about four broncs. Yo're haidin' for Buckeye. North of Buckeye lays the Wineglass spread. Bart Bidwell runs it. Find him an' tell him the drive is on. Salt Crick is the place. He'll understand what to do—an' he's expectin' yuh. Git a wiggle on! I'll make yuh up a pack of grub while yuh get the broncs."

Sleepy was a good soldier. He took his orders literally and without argument. He hurried off to the remuda corral, while Link led Loma into the ranch house, where he lit a lamp and showed the way to a food storeroom off the big kitchen.

The Quarter Circle S cook slept in the bunkhouse with the other men and Link did not bother him. He selected an empty flour sack and stuffed it with food, then he went down to the corrals again. Sleepy was ready. He tied the food on behind the saddle, looped a couple of canteens over the horn and swung astride.

"*Adios,* folks," he drawled. "I'll be seein' yuh."

He surged into the night, the relay of ponies clattering after him.

As the sound of Sleepy's departure died away, Link turned to Loma. "That long walk shoulda give yuh an appetite," he drawled whimsically. "What say we scare up a little breakfast, then I'll saddle a couple of broncs an' take yuh home?

"We got about three hours before daylight yet, an' to play safe we want Coburn to think yuh've been home all night. If he was to investigate an' find yuh'd disappeared, he might get suspicious an' not make that drive—which would upset all our plans complete."

"I am hungry," admitted Loma. "This will be fun."

Together they cooked the meal and ate it. Not a great deal was said. A strange, thrilling constraint lay between them. It was as if both were unwilling to trust their emotions. Fate, chance, or something of the sort, was drawing the lives of these two young people closer and closer together, welding them in bonds of mutual regard and affection. Both realized this, and a gentle shyness blanketed them.

They were still silent as they rode away toward the Bar C 88, but it was a silence in which both were, queerly enough, content. Not until they had crossed the ridge between the two valleys and were on the fringe of the open country beyond, did Link speak. He had reined in and was staring out to where the Bar C 88 buildings stood.

"Yuh better go on foot from here," he decided. "Everythin' seems quiet enough. An' when yuh get there, jest flash a light twice from a window on this side. That'll tell me yuh got there safe."

He wanted to say something more, something that wasn't so matter-of-fact, but for some reason the words would not come. The same constraint lay over his companion.

"Good night, Link," she said quietly.

Loma slipped to the ground and hurried off, disappearing in the haze. Link dismounted and squatted on his heels, rolling a cigarette. Not a sound came to him from the buildings and, after a little time, a light flickered twice through the night. He nodded and stood up, as though to mount. But he shook his head slowly.

"No," he muttered. "Yuh stay right here, Link Sanderson, until yuh see that crowd of polecats move out. Mebbe that dirty rat of a Texas Jack put over his argument with Coburn about takin' Loma with 'em. I'm stayin' until I'm shore of it."

And stay he did, sitting with his back against the bole of a huge sugar pine, waiting with the patience of an Indian while the day slowly grew out of the night and the dawn began dissipating the mists. He saw the renegade riders of the Bar C 88 rise and go about their preparations.

And finally he saw them leave, riding south along the center of the valley. When they had disappeared with Texas Jack in their midst, Link rose stiffly, mounted and cut back over the ridge towards home.

CHAPTER VIII

Coburn's Raid

ALL day long the renegade riders of the Bar C 88 worked feverishly. The cattle they had bunched in the valley the previous day had scattered some, but not badly. These were once more bunched and started moving towards the lower end of the valley. Leaving them in the care of three of his men, Coburn sent the rest into the timber again to pick up any stragglers that had been overlooked the day before.

"This is our last big chance at the gravy," he growled. "We don't want to overlook any of it."

There was no complaint from the riders. The more cattle they threw into this rustled herd, the bigger their cut of the profits would be, so they spared neither themselves nor their horses.

Coburn had collected a small remuda of saddle mounts and, as soon as any bronco showed signs of exhaustion, the rider would race in to the remuda and pick a fresh horse. These men, despite the crooked twist in their make-up, were top-hands every one—men who knew their business—and there was nothing overlooked.

Coburn detailed himself and Texas Jack as guards. He selected, as his own point of outlook, a spot on top of the dividing ridge between the Bar C 88 and the Quarter Circle S ranges. From this spot, by the aid of a pair of field-glasses, he could scrutinize all that went on at the Sanderson ranch. But he could find no evidence of untoward activity

at that place. After one long look, he lowered the glasses with a sneer.

"Yuh pose as bein' such a wise jasper, Link Sanderson," he muttered. "But this is shore one time when yo're sound asleep at the switch. Time yuh wake up to what's goin' on, we'll be a long way from here—too far away for yuh to do anythin' about it. An' some day later on, mebbeso we'll meet again, yuh an' me. I'll finish the score then, if Joe Colinga don't beat me to it."

At noon the rustlers stopped for a short bite to eat, then resumed their toil. And when sundown came and they gathered around Coburn, the latter knew, by the size of the herd before them, that the Bar C 88 range had been combed clean.

"We eat an' rest for an hour," said Coburn, "then we hit the trail. I know yuh fellers are tired, but this ain't the time to stop."

"Tired—hell!" spat one of the riders. "I've rode thirty-six hours at a stretch, more'n once in my life—an' for jest what measly wages I was drawin'. With a real stake in sight, I'll ride fifty if I have to. I reckon the rest of the gang feel the same."

By the nods and grunts of approval, it was plain that he had expressed the sentiments of the rest. A hard, game crowd, mused Coburn, that would stand a lot of stopping to keep them from putting this thing over. He thought of Link Sanderson again, of Loma Carlyle, and particularly of that fatuous old fool of a Judge Reynolds. He barked a short, sneering laugh of contempt.

AT the Quarter Circle S Ranch headquarters, Link Sanderson was moving leisurely enough. He met the men at breakfast and told them to stick around close to the ranch, and put their riding equipment, their rifles and gunbelts in good shape. When questioned about the absence of Sleepy Burch, Link merely grinned.

"Yuh know," said Shorty Pierce, scrubbing a cleaning patch industriously up and down the barrel of his Winchester, "yuh know, I'll swear to gosh that I heard somebody come an' get Sleepy outa bed early this mornin'. I didn't wake up complete, but I heard 'em jest the same—sorta in a dream like."

"Yuh would," snorted Bob Rennifer, Shorty's bosom pal and perpetual torment. "Yo're allus havin' some sort of pipe-dream. I never seen one of these little, sawed-off squirts like yuh that wasn't full of fits an' starts. Yuh probably heard Jim snorin'—that's what yuh heard."

Bob winked at Jim Staley, a gaunt old puncher with little, twinkly eyes and a grave, mahogany-colored face. Jim nodded. "'Twas either that, or the ghost of Joe Colinga was spurrin' him, Bob," agreed the old puncher gravely. "Yuh know I was plumb shocked the way Shorty acted day before yestiday. He was plumb bloodthirsty. The way he pulled on the rope when we strung up Colinga sorta horrified me, yuh might say."

Shorty's round, pink-cheeked face turned a brick red. Truth be known, Shorty had been a trifle sick at the spectacle of stern and ready justice the Quarter Circle S punchers had meted out on the murderous renegade.

"Yah!" he retorted. "Yuh jaspers think yo're smart, don't yuh?—jest because yuh got a set of innards as hard as nigger-haid rocks. But if yuh know so much, where is Sleepy? Answer me that, if yuh can."

Bob looked at Shorty in pitying amazement. "Why, don't yuh know, Shorty? Shucks, that's shore too bad. Sleepy's gone to Kalamazoo to borrow a left-handed monkey wrench."

Shorty tossed his Winchester onto his bunk and stamped to the door of the bunkhouse. There he turned. "Yah!" he blurted. "Yah! Yuh long-laiged, hoss-faced drink of alkali. Yah-h!"

With that final broadside he stumped off to the saddle shed with all the dignity his five-foot-three-inch carcass could muster. Jim Staley curled up on his bunk, convulsed with silent laughter. Bob Rennifer grinned from ear to ear.

José Salvatore, a lithe, sunny-faced young Mexican vaquero, who possessed the undying friendship and admiration of every man on the ranch, smiled gently.

Behind this bantering front, every one of them knew that serious business of some sort portended, and their preparations were thorough and painstaking. By mid-afternoon they were ready, not a detail overlooked. And now Link gathered them about him again.

He told them what was in the air, and laid his plans before them. "We could go over right now an' bust this thing up," he concluded. "But it wouldn't get the results I want. Coburn could take the stand that he was merely pullin' a round-up in the usual way. An' while we'd know different, we couldn't prove it.

"As it is, we'll let 'em make the drive. They'll start tonight. We'll let 'em go all night, an' we'll be follerin' 'em. Come mornin' we'll have 'em where we want 'em. Coburn won't have an alibi then that'll hold water. We'll have him cold. An' once an' for all we'll clear the atmosphere in these parts."

"Supposin'," drawled Jim Staley slowly, "supposin' when we come up on 'em they don't elect to make a fight of it, Link. Mebbe they'll jest light right out an' keep on runnin'. We'll get the cattle back, but we won't do much harm to their scurvy hides."

Link nodded. "I thought of that, Jim, an' I've made arrangements. That's where Sleepy is. I sent him off early this mornin' to carry word to Bart Bidwell, who runs the Wineglass spread north of Buckeye. Bart's a friend of mine an' will know what to do. He'll be layin' out with some of his men in the willows along Salt Crick. An' should Coburn lose his nerve an' make a run for it, Bart'll be waitin' for him."

Shorty turned on Bob and Jim triumphantly. "Yah—yuh wise aigs! Didn't I tell yuh I heard somebody get Sleepy out early this mornin'? Think yo're wise, don't yuh?"

"Yuh win, shrimp," grinned Bob. "Yuh win."

"Yo're doggoned right," expanded Shorty. "I allus win. When do we start, Link?"

"No hurry," drawled Link. "If we don't leave until midnight we can come up to 'em easy by dawn. They can move jest so fast with the stock. So, seein' as yuh'll have to miss a lot o' sleep tonight, yuh might as well store up some while the chance is good."

IN the crisp, invigorating chill of night, Link and his men saddled up. There was no delay in their departure. Link took the lead and they swung south and east, circling the lower end of the ridge that divided the two valleys. As they struck the tableland and turned directly east, a low, rumbling overtone came to their ears. It was the combined complaint of cattle under forced drive.

Link reined in, rolling a cigarette. "They're jest clearin' the lower end of the Bar C 88 range," he announced. "We got a lot of time. Take it easy."

They killed a good half hour before moving on again, then dropped in directly behind the stolen herd, some half mile or more in the rear. The warm, bovine smell of the cattle hung thick in the damp air. Link called to José Salvatore, his Mexican rider.

"José, yo're far an' away the best scout in this crowd. Yuh sneak on ahaid an' get a line on that gang. See if they're actin' in any way suspicious. They may have put out a rear guard of some sort, so to speak. An' we don't want to go blunderin' into a ambush."

José's white teeth gleamed and he cantered quickly off. Link held his own pace and that of the others down to a slow walk. The hours wore away. José returned to report that the raiders had no rear guard out, but were concentrating every man on the task of keeping the herd moving as fast as possible.

The complaint of the cattle was constant and now and then, echoing faintly, came the shrill, high-pitched yell of a

rider, urging the bellowing herd onward.

"Shore," mused Link, "Coburn ain't complimentin' my good sense any. He musta figgered to ketch me sound asleep. Well, he allus was powerful shore of himself. He'll learn his lesson too late."

When dawn, gray and chill, broke over the world, the herd had passed the point where the tableland ran down to the edge of the desert. Link's wariness increased. To be seen now would spoil everything. Therefore, he led the way to the base of the Cobalts and into the timber.

"We'll skirt along through here," he explained. "We'll be able to keep closer this way, without the chance of bein' seen."

"When're we gonna pop the whistle, Link?" asked Shorty impatiently. "Them jaspers are gettin' plumb in the open now."

"Wait'll we hit Salt Crick," answered Link.

Bob Rennifer looked at his stubby partner. "Yuh musta had a change of heart, shrimp. What'cha been doin'—drinkin' tiger's milk? Never saw yuh so full of hell an' leather. Bet the first time a gun goes off yuh'll beat it fer parts unknown."

"Oh—yeah!" snapped Shorty. "Well, I'll tell the world that if I do, I'll be plumb strangled on the dust yuh'd be kickin' up while leadin' the way."

The sun rose and climbed upward. The distant herd and the rustlers were almost hidden by the dust that funneled into the air. In the distance a low, winding line of green showed—Salt Creek.

Link reined in again, his manner brisk and sure. "Bob, you and Shorty cut straight south until yuh get well beyond the herd. Then turn east an' move up fast. José and Jim take this side. Move up on the flanks an' don't let anybody break through. I'll hold the center myself. This job is one that's been a long time overdue. We might as well make it a good one, while we're at it. An' that crowd would prefer lead to a rope any time. I would myself. Savvy what yo're to do?"

The riders nodded. "Good! One thing more—Bart Bidwell an' his boys are out along the crick. Don't go shootin' into them willows. This oughta be over quick. Let's go—an' good luck!"

The long wait was over, and action ahead of them at last. The trap had been set, the quarry had entered it and now came the final act of springing that trap. Low in their saddles, Link's men raced away.

Link had taken the most dangerous position himself. He did it without any thought of heroics. It was simply the creed he had been born and bred to. He knew that when the surprise first came, Coburn and his men would surge straight ahead.

But the reception they would get at the creek would make them rebound, like a wave striking a rocky shore. What was left of them would come pounding back at him. Some might cut out to the flanks, but would turn in again when they met a reception from Bob and Shorty, José and Jim.

The five of them had just about attained their desired positions before discovery came. This was announced by a snarling report or two that sent lead skittering in dusty paths around Shorty and Bob. These two wasted no time in returning the fire. From the opposite flank José and Jim opened up.

Caught between two fires, Coburn reacted as Link had figured he would. He called his riders about him, decided that as far as the cattle were concerned it was a lost cause, then thundered out straight ahead for Salt Creek. There dismay and fear bit deep, for a volley of long-range rifle fire came that cut down two men and a horse.

The horse happened to be Coburn's own. He kicked free of the saddle as the beast went down and caught one of the mounts that had lost a rider. It was Dopey's horse. Dopey himself was crumpled up in a tangled heap, at the final end of a crooked trail that he had traveled all his life.

Coburn tried the north flank then, figuring that if he could reach the timber he could make a getaway. He lost another man at this, before the deadly accuracy of Jim Staley's Winchester. Another of Coburn's band, racing south, paralleling the creek, found himself cut off by the alert Shorty and Bob. He fought it out, cursing and desperate.

Shorty went down, one side of his head gory. Bob Rennifer, with a whimpering curse, tore down on the rustler, shooting at every jump of his horse. At two hundred yards he found the target and the rustler slumped. Then Bob whirled back to his partner. He choked out broken words of thanksgiving when he found that Shorty had merely been creased.

So far, Link had fired not a single shot. In fact, he had seen no one to shoot at. But he could chart the course of battle easily by the sound of the guns. He was especially gratified by the volley that came from the willow-shrouded reaches of Salt Creek.

"That about settles it," he muttered. "It was the one big gamble of my play. If Sleepy hadn't been able to git Bidwell on the job, then our birds would shore enough have slid through to a getaway. As it is. . . ."

His eyes smarted from the dust that billowed into the air in ever thickening clouds. The cattle were moiling and bawling in fright and confusion, yet their thirst was stronger than any mere fear of gunshots, and their progress towards the water in Salt Creek was steady.

Abruptly the cattle split and through the dust came two riders, leaning far over and spurring madly. They did not see Link until they were within ten yards of him. One set his bronco to a rearing halt, the other swerving aside and pounding past. Both began shooting.

Link's own gun winked back, in measured reply. The rider who had halted went down in a welter of dust and hoofs. And Link, his left arm limp and dead and bloody, whirled after the last fugitive.

It was Deuce Coburn, craven and venomous. Out of the dust thundered Link and Coburn, the latter some hundred yards in the lead. Link's face, white and drawn with pain, was nevertheless set in a mask of relentless iron, his eyes narrow and cold.

For a time Coburn held his own. But his mount was tired from the work of the day before and the all-night drive. Link's bronco was the stronger and began cutting down the distance between them. Coburn spurred and quirted madly, but to no avail. With inexorable surety, Link drew up.

Coburn's face, looking back over his shoulder, was white and snarling. He began shooting, throwing shot after shot in a wild effort to stop this figure of retribution coming steadily on. Link held his fire, knowing he would need it later.

Something whisked Link's hat from his head, sending it spinning. He scarcely noticed it. And then he saw an amazing thing, one that sent a surge of disgust through him. Coburn dragged his badly blown horse to a stop, slid to the ground and stood there, his hands high over his head. Coburn had turned yellow—quit when a showdown was inevitable.

Link reined in beside the craven, his gun bearing steadily on Coburn's heart.

"Don't shoot!" gasped Coburn. "For Gawd's sake, don't shoot! I quit. I give in. I'll get all the cattle back if yuh'll gimme a chance—just a chance to square myself, that's all I ask. Don't shoot!"

For the moment Link said nothing, though his tight lips curled in scorn. He heard other riders pounding towards him and a high-pitched yell told him it was his own men. José Salvatore and Jim Staley whirled up.

"Tie him up, Jim," snapped Link.

Coburn did not protest. He merely shook and whined, his last vestige of courage absolutely gone. By the time Jim had finished, other riders came rac-

ing, with Sleepy Burch and Bart Bidwell leading the way. And presently came Bob Rennifer, supporting a conscious, but very sick Shorty, in his saddle.

"None of 'em got by us, Link," shouted Sleepy. "How about it?"

"I reckon it was a complete clean-up," said Link quietly. "This rat is the last an' he's tryin' to beg off. Bob, how bad is Shorty hurt?"

Bob was grinning in relief. "Not too bad. He's got a hard haid, the shrimp has. It turned that slug same as a hunk of iron might. But yuh got a bad wing yoreself."

"It's nothin'," said Link. "I'll make out. Now then, men, what d'yuh think we oughta do with that?" He nodded towards Coburn.

"That's easy, Link," said Jim Staley coldly. "He planned this steal, and the rest paid. He oughta pay, too. I suggest a rope."

"No!" gasped Coburn. "Not that—not that! I'll square everythin'—I'll square it, I say."

"Yuh cain't," rasped Link. "Yuh cain't bring back Long Andy, an' I know yuh set Spider Glick an' Joe Colinga after him, same as yuh set 'em after Dad an' me. No, yuh cain't square a thing, Coburn. The rest of yuh boys have heard what Jim suggested. What's yore sentiments on the matter?"

The answering chorus spelled doom to Coburn. For a moment Link thought the fellow was going to crumple right where he stood. But hot, sour hate galvanized him to some semblance of courage. He cursed and spat, his red eyes fixed on Link.

"Damn yuh, Sanderson!" he shrieked. "Yuh think yuh've won, don't yuh? Yuh'll find out different. Ever hear of Texas Jack? Well, where is he? He started out with us. But he was crazy over that Carlyle dame, an' he's gone back after her. Yuh lose, after all."

Link's head jerked up and he whirled to the others. "Who's got the fastest and freshest hoss?" he demanded, his voice husky. "Quick! I want it."

Sleepy slipped to the ground. "This bronc'll qualify, Link. But man, yo're wounded. Let me go—let any of us go. We—"

"Gimme that hoss," snapped Link. "I'm all right."

Before the rest could speak again he was in the saddle and racing away, back to the Bar C 88 range.

CHAPTER IX

Hungry Hearts

TEXAS JACK crouched in the timber on the main slope of the Cobalts, a quarter of a mile above the Bar C 88 ranch buildings. His eyes, small, glittering and bloodshot, stared downward with the set, feral patience of some beast of the wild. He had broken away from Coburn and the rest of the raiders, shortly before midnight. Coburn had cursed him roundly on hearing of his plans, but the renegade had insisted stubbornly.

"If yuh don't finish this drive with us, yuh won't come in for any cut on the profits," Coburn had threatened.

Texas Jack had shrugged. "Keep yore profits," had been his answer. "I'm goin' back."

Coburn, cursed with greed, had finally acquiesced. He concluded to say nothing to the others, planning to pocket Texas Jack's share himself. And Texas Jack had turned his horse on the back trail.

The renegade's brain was warped. Far back in his cowardly soul he hated Loma Carlyle bitterly; hated her almost as much as he did Link Sanderson. The memory of the ignominious manner in which Link had smashed him to the ground that first day in Thunder City, when he had accosted Loma, burned in him like a hot iron. He had sworn vengeance that day and each passing hour had intensified his thirst for revenge.

Being the innate coward and bully that he was, Texas Jack had no desire to run into Link Sanderson. He was hoping against hope that Joe Colinga

would succeed where Spider Glick had failed. And he resolved that Loma Carlyle should pay both her own debt and that of Link.

He had not hurried his trip back. He would take his time, he decided—take his time and play the game absolutely safe. Therefore, though he reached the Bar C 88 just at dawn, he did not immediately go to the buildings.

He had heard of the way Molly Downs had beaten Joe Colinga to earth and he had no desire to run foul of this stalwart Western woman. She might have come down to the ranch to visit Loma again. So the renegade had taken up his position well up in the timber where he could watch without being seen. He was going to make sure that Loma was absolutely alone before he made any move.

The sun came up, dispelling the mists of night and warming the spring-touched slopes. Smoke curled up from the chimney of the ranch house. Perhaps an hour later Loma herself appeared. She went to the corrals, saddled a bronco and took the trail for Thunder City.

Texas Jack's first inclination was to attempt to ride her down, but he gave this up on realizing that she might and probably would outrun him. Also, she carried a rifle and he knew that she was the sort who would use it. So he bided his time, his hate feeding his patience.

Hunger came upon him and, as the ranch was, to all intents deserted, he slipped down cautiously and made his way to it. From the storehouse he secured a supply of food and went back to his hide-out. After eating, he stretched himself in the sun and slept. It was mid-afternoon when he awoke, to resume his scrutiny of the ranch house, just in time to see Loma returning from town, still alone.

His lips twisted in savage satisfaction. His opportunity was at hand. He'd give her time to become settled down, then make his advance. Loma unsaddled and walked briskly to the house. She disappeared and the place lay somnolent and quiet.

From his saddle boot the renegade lifted his rifle, hitched up his gunbelt and stole downward, after removing his spurs in the cause of quietness. He selected a blind corner of the ranch house for his advance, and slipped across the intervening space without challenge of any sort. Here his stealth and care intensified.

Silent as a shadow he glided along and peered around the next corner, to view the porch. A leer of triumph twisted his repelling, unshaven features. There was an old, canvas lounging chair in evidence, and in this was couched the slim, strong figure of the girl. She was asleep, her face, soft and glowing in repose, turned slightly towards him. She had loosened her hair and it spread beneath her head in a blue-black cascade of sheening silk.

Texas Jack's eyes narrowed, his leer became more pronounced. Like some prowling jungle cat he stole towards her. Once she stirred and sighed a little, like a tired child. Texas Jack froze, his lips peeling back. But Loma soon quieted and he moved forward once more. A step in front of her he paused, feasting his eyes on her loveliness. Then, with a muttered curse, his talon hand flashed forward and fastened on her shoulder.

Loma awoke with a start, staring up at him. The color drained from her face, and for a second deep in her eyes lay naked, unashamed terror.

"You!" she gasped.

"Yeah," he leered. "Me! I come back to settle a little debt."

The terror in her eyes vanished, and scathing anger and contempt replaced it. "Take your filthy hand off me," she blazed. "Link told you he'd kill you if you ever bothered me again, and he will."

Texas Jack laughed wolfishly. "He won't be in any condition to kill anybody, after Joe Colinga gets through with him."

It was Loma's turn to laugh. "You

fool! Joe Colinga made the mistake of trying to dry-gulch Eagle Sanderson the other day. Evidently you didn't know about that. But if you're waiting for Joe Colinga to do anything to Link you'll have a long wait."

Texas Jack knew that Loma was telling him truthful words. He hadn't heard about that particular incident, and he was visibly startled. But he steadied again. "Either way, it ain't gonna help yuh any. Yo're goin' with me. Yuh can take yore choice of comin' along peaceable, or bein' tied up. Which'll it be?"

Loma's brain had been racing. Her first furious anger at herself for being thus caught off her guard, gave way to desperate cunning. Her demeanor changed. She appeared to wilt, helpless with fright.

"D-don't tie me," she stammered. "I'll come quietly."

It gratified the brute in Texas Jack to see this girl apparently quailing in terror before him. He gloated over the spectacle. Loma had seemingly collapsed into tears. Her hands were over her face, her shoulders heaving convulsively. But had the renegade looked closely enough he would have seen, through her slightly spread fingers, eyes of stormy, smoky violet, watching him alertly.

He straightened up, removing his grasp. This was easy—too easy. He had thought all along that this girl had courage, that she was a fighter, and he had relished the thought of taming her. But here she was, in a typically feminine paroxysm of tears, shaking before his mere glance.

"Okeh," he snarled. "I won't tie yuh up, but if yuh don't come quiet, or if yuh try any tricks, I'll quirt the devil outa yuh. Stand up!"

She did, with an explosive suddenness that Texas Jack wasn't looking for. And as she gained her feet, one small, brown, tightly clenched fist curved up and out with all her hundred and twenty pounds of outraged dignity behind it. It landed with a very respectable spat on the renegade's face, spinning him off balance. And, before he could recover himself, she had leaped off the porch and was running like a deer for the corrals.

Cursing and raging, Texas Jack went after her. But she beat him to the first fence, slithered over it just out of his reach and topped the next one before he could catch her. By the time the renegade had topped this one, she was among the sheds and feed barn.

Then began a game of desperate hide-and-seek. Honest fear tipped Loma's heels with wings, as she dodged hither and yon, just managing to keep her lead. She knew it could not last forever. Sooner or later, staunch as she was, this brute would tire her out.

However, she determined to fight for her freedom as long as she possibly could. She wondered if her traitorous riders had left a weapon of any kind in the bunkhouse. She began working around to make a dash for it. But Texas Jack, guessing her intent, headed her back.

He was cursing horribly. Loma thought of a drooling, mad animal. Her strength began to go.

"Link!" she murmured brokenly. "Link!"

She caught up a short length of wood and, with her back to the wall of a shed, determined to make a final, desperate stand. There was just a chance that she might get in a lucky blow. With the club held high, she faced the renegade, her heart thundering cruelly, her breath coming in gasps.

Berserk, the renegade charged in. She swung the club with all her might, and Texas Jack caught the impact on an upraised, warding arm. The next moment he had her, his hands tearing at her like claws.

Neither heard the pounding, desperate hoofs of a horse, hammering to a halt not far away. Loma fought with all her strength, but knew it was a losing fight. The cry that came from her throat seemed to rise of its own accord, despairing, heart-broken.

"Link! Link!"

"Right here, sweetheart!"

The answer reached her ears, and she thought she must be dreaming. But it was no dream, the manner in which Texas Jack was torn away from her and thrown headlong. Nor was there anything dream-like in the lean, dusty, blood-stained figure that faced the sprawled renegade, faced him in a low, deadly crouch.

Loma tried to speak, her arms outstretched. But the arms fell empty by her sides, the words did not come. For Link was not looking at her. His face, pale and pain-twisted beneath the mahogany tan, was as bitter and stern and cold as death. His eyes held the abysmal chill of glacial ice, and they stared with unwinking intentness at Texas Jack, who was struggling to his feet, his features a mirror of mingled fear, hate, and thwarted cunning.

Link was speaking, and his words fell in low, measured cadence.

"The finish, yuh poison polecat! Throw 'em! I'm gonna kill yuh anyhow—but throw 'em!"

Texas Jack didn't want to throw his guns in an even break. He had always maneuvered for an edge—for a set-up in his favor. But death was looking him in the eye, remorseless, certain. He licked his lips, staring at Link's face, lined and gray and haggard. He noted the limp, dangling left arm and the blood-clotted sleeve.

Maybe the edge was there after all. Maybe this fellow was far gone with weakness from that wound. Maybe his movements would be slowed down just that split second which meant the difference of life or death. For the first and last time in his life, the renegade gambled.

His hands blurred down and started up. They only started, for there was red flame dancing before him, measured thunder in his ears, and hot, vengeful lead lashing through his body, beating him backward, crushing out the life spark, pounding him down . . . down . . . down. . . .

Like an empty, useless, tossed-aside sack, Texas Jack slithered to the ground, without having fired a single shot.

A long minute Link Sanderson stared at the lifeless figure before him. Then he straightened slowly—a man infinitely weary. He turned to face the girl who was coming to him, her face white, but her eyes brilliant with deathless glory.

"Loma!" he mumbled. "Loma—honey!"

He tottered and sagged, his face falling still and silent against her as she caught his crumpling body in her arms.

EAGLE SANDERSON barked wrathfully at Sleepy Burch. "Doggone it!" he roared. "Yuh ain't told me how bad Link's hurt."

Sleepy grinned. "Boss, yuh oughta be ashamed of yoreself. D'yuh think Link is the sort to pass out from a single slug? An' him yore own son! Shucks, that jasper couldn't be killed with a post maul."

"All right," growled the old fellow. "Now that yuh've quit scarin' me into fits, suppose yuh tell me what happened. Roll me a cigarette first."

Sleepy rolled the smoke, put it between Eagle's lips, scratched a match and obediently related his tale.

"When the rest of us got to the Bar C 88," he concluded, "we finds Texas Jack was daid as he'll ever be an' Link sprawled out in the shade, with Miss Carlyle holdin' his haid in her arms, cryin' over him an' kissin' him plumb scandalous. Link had jest come to an' seemed to be shore enjoyin' hisself. Anyhow, José an' me finally got him to the house an' in blankets an' José went after Doc Jasper.

"I stuck around until the doc got there an' fixed Link up. Then I come home to report. An' that's all, I reckon—exceptin' that there'll shore be a weddin' in these parts before long."

Eagle Sanderson chuckled happily. "Sleepy," he said, "I ain't had a drink for a month. Let's celebrate."

A Strange Trail

By Clinton Dangerfield

Courage such as Molly Wardell possessed comes to but a few brave hearts, and surely Molly should have as mate a man whose valor equalled hers. Molly thought she had made such a choice, until she took that strange trail that led to new and untried dangers.

A DOZEN of the Diamond D geldings, half wild from long disuse, galloped unwillingly toward the gaping mouth of the home corral, forced on by Molly Wardell and her father. Wardell's stern blue eyes softened as he watched the careless ease of his daughter's riding.

"Knee grip as good as a man's," thought Wardell, "and no other girl half as pretty in this whole damn county!"

Molly caught his glance and flashed an eager, happy smile at him. Nothing delighted her more than aiding in the recapture of horses needed for the remuda. She whirled her mount, cutting off the escape of a plunging gray, then gave a triumphant whoopee as the bunch streamed into the corral. Before her father could leave his saddle she sprang down, put up the bars, then leaned against them, laughing at him.

"Beat yuh to it, Dad! Don't yuh think I'm just as good as Lin at rounding 'em up?"

"Lin?" muttered her father, suddenly frowning. "Molly, he claims you two will marry soon as he gets back from Mexico with them cattle. That true?" She nodded assent, her lovely sun-bronzed face serious now. "Molly, Lin Derry's temper has showed up plumb hellish in the past two years. I've had to pay him out of lots of trouble 'count of it. Oh, yeah! I know he's never showed *you* no temper—a man don't in courtin' days."

She seized on a chance to change the subject. "Look, Dad! Yonder comes a rider, toppin' that rise!"

Wardell turned in his saddle, his stern eyes narrowed. "Comin' hell for leather. Bad news! Damn! That's Curt Jones, who ought to be down in Mexico with Lin!"

They waited, breathless. Then the man raced up to them; his horse slid to a halt.

Curt, dusty, haggard, waited for no greeting, but broke out, as he halted, "Lin's in bad trouble, Mr. Wardell. Them cattle were lousy, an' Lin went wild over the long ride he'd had for nothin'. I tried to tame him down, 'cause he had yore roll and we needed to keep cool. Couldn't do nothin' with him. He knocked Mendoza down; an' when the fellow hops up, he goes for his gun. 'Course, Lin beat him to the draw —kilt him."

Molly whitened at the news, clutched at the bars for support.

"This here Mendoza," Curt went on, "was a cousin of General Yznaga's. The general and his men was expected in an hour, ridin' through there. Lin was jailed, and yore roll, o' course, disappeared in the process, boss. Yznaga come in sooner'n they expected, and I got private speech with him. He said Lin would be shot at sunrise, an' I said if he'd give me time to get to you, yuh'd ransom him."

Wardell looked grim at this, and said nothing.

"But this here Yznaga," the cowboy continued, "he's a dandy, and a great horseman. He's horse-mad, like some folks are money-mad. He says to me if I'll bring him Ace, the golden stallion, he'll take the horse in exchange for Lin's life, an' let Lin escape secretly. Yznaga was up here once and seen Ace. Tried to buy him from Kit Bridger, but couldn't.

"So, ridin' relays, I came to Kit Bridger's place, an' told him what Yznaga said. Kit says, 'Reckon yuh know Lin Derry sent me word, just afore he went down into Mexico, that he aimed to shoot me on sight when he got back. He picked a quarrel with me over nothin'. Wardell stepped in between us, but that only put the matter off. Now yo're askin' me to send the only thing I care about down into the hands of those Mexicans to be rode to death, cut to pieces with a quirt. Ace saved my life twice, an' I'll not do it.'

"And says Kit, moreover, 'Reckon yuh got sense enough to know, Curt, that if Yznaga did let Lin escape from jail, he'd see to it he was shot while he was runnin'. It's a little Spanish custom.'"

"And I'll bet Kit told yuh," Wardell interpolated harshly, "that if yuh went back down into Mexico yuh'd never leave there alive, once yuh delivered the stallion. That Mendoza had a following; Yznaga wouldn't dare leave anyone alive who knew he'd traded the life of Mendoza's killer for a horse."

"Yeah," Curt said wearily, slipping from his saddle and supporting himself by an arm hooked over the saddle horn. "He said that. So I borrowed me a fresh horse from Kit and come on fast as I could."

"Kit Bridger's heartless, cruel!" gasped Molly. "But we'll get up a rescue party! We'll save Lin!"

Her father shook his head. "Yznaga has that section of Mexico under martial control. We couldn't raise three men for an expedition like that, because it would be suicide for all of us. I'm sorry for Lin, Molly. I'm sorry for yuh. But. . . ." He stopped and turned to Curt. "Come on up to the house. Time yuh had food and drink."

Curt ate, drank, fell across the bed pointed out to him, and slept like a log.

Meanwhile Molly wept and argued. But at last her father made her see clearly that nothing would induce either himself or his friends to attempt a rescue. This was confirmed by two of the neighboring ranchers who rode in on business. Both of them said, just as Wardell had done, that they were sorry for Lin. But something chill about their regrets made it plain that the devilish temper Lin had shown in the past two years had wrecked all the good-will the neighborhood had once felt toward him.

That night at ten o'clock Wardell

drew his daughter close to him and said, "Yuh understand now, Molly, that we'd give help if we could? But we can't; he brought this on himself. Yuh don't want us to go down there, merely to die in the same town with him, eh?"

She clung to her father. "No, I don't want that."

"Then yuh go up to yore room and try to sleep. Yo're worn out with this storming and crying."

She nodded, exhausted with emotion. He kissed her, and she went meekly away. She flung herself, dressed as she was, in her riding clothes, on the bed. There she lay, face upward, staring at the ceiling, not sleeping but thinking.

THAT night, about two o'clock, a slender figure, carefully dressed in men's clothes, slipped like a shadow from the ranch house and, in a short time, rode quietly into the starlit night, heading straight for Kit Bridger's place.

Her only precaution against pursuit was to leave her father a note, saying she had left for Omaha to visit a friend. Her father might not believe her, but it would take him some time to check up on her whereabouts. Meanwhile she would be well on her way to Mexico.

Molly found Bridger's very quiet when she arrived. Kit and his men were asleep in the ranch house. As he had no family, the main building was ranch house and bunkhouse in one.

No dog barked. Only, in the distance, an owl hooted dismally. Dismounting, Molly stripped her own horse, turned it into the corral. She would use her own outfit on the mount that she was after now—the great golden stallion, Ace.

He was not loose in the corral. He wouldn't be; his temper was too high to turn him among the geldings. She made straight for the barn. The first stall she came to was occupied by Ace. It was a heavy stall, built of timber, reinforced, the door solid oak and padlocked.

She stared at the padlock in dismay, remembering now that Curt, some days before, had told her Bridger had said two attempts had been made to steal the stallion. But she had never thought of Bridger's keeping him under lock and key.

She recalled also that Curt reported Bridger as saying, "Any thief who gets Ace signs his own death warrant. I'll never leave the trail till I find him."

Well, if she could ever get the padlock open, Kit Bridger might trail all he liked, for the golden stallion was the fastest animal in the whole countryside. She might trust Ace to show a clean pair of heels to anything which Kit Bridger could ride after them.

The padlock soon demonstrated to her that only the key would serve her purpose. She stood thinking. That key would be somewhere in Kit's own room —probably in his clothes. She knew that the only ranch-owner distinction Bridger affected was that of occupying a bedroom of his own. She had questioned Curt artfully about Kit Bridger and all his habits. She herself knew nothing of him, except the brief glimpse she had had once while both of them were in town.

So, with a desperate courage which refused to think of danger, she went straight to the house.

People of this countryside didn't bolt their doors, and Molly found the front door unlocked as she had expected. Once inside, she again drew upon the information she had cunningly extracted from the unsuspecting Curt. Bridger's room lay to the left, at the front; on the other side of the narrow hall, further back, his men testified to their sound slumber by loud snores.

But Kit Bridger's room was silent. She stole to his door. It was closed, but not locked, she soon found, as her cautious fingers slowly turned the knob. Now, as she opened the door a little way, her heart jumped at the sound of the rusty hinges creaking.

But Bridger, sound asleep on the bed, did not wake. Through the curtainless, wide-open windows, the newly risen moon, round and bright, poured a flood

of brilliance. Thankful for its aid, Molly hurried softly to the chaps and trousers flung carelessly across a chair.

The key was not there.

Again, she stood thinking and, unwillingly enough, realized that the key was probably under Kit Bridger's pillow.

She had left her boots hanging to the horn of her saddle, and her moccasin-clad feet were light as falling feathers as she crept toward Kit Bridger's bedside.

He lay on his back, one hand flung out across the sheet which covered him. Even in sleep his handsome bronzed face looked stern, the mouth resolutely closed. Between the fine arch of his brows a slight frown, which had become habitual, added its touch of warning not to meddle with a man whom many feared.

His gun was not in his holster, and Molly realized with deepening fright that if the key were under his pillow, no doubt the gun was also! She was in men's clothes; if she waked him getting at the key, what if he jerked out the gun and shot her before he realized she was only a girl?

Angrily she told herself she hadn't come there to entertain such thoughts. She had shouldered a man's job and, like a man, she must get through with it, ignoring whatever terrors lay in the path. Above all she needed coolness now, and steadiness.

Close to the bedside, she stared down anxiously at Kit Bridger's face and suddenly found herself held by it. She shook off the deepening fascination. Was she mad to be standing there staring at a man who, if he waked, might kill her?

Crouching beside him, she thrust small, exploring fingers under his pillow, keeping the pressure of her fingers always down against the mattress, hoping in this way not to disturb him. She would have had little chance of continuing this had not Bridger been without sleep for the last forty-eight hours. Seeking the doctor for an injured man, wrestling with a stampede, and other unexpected troubles had resulted in tonight's deep sleep, although usually the slightest sound, the faintest vibration, would waken him.

Molly pushed her hand on further, sometimes moving it to the right, sometimes to the left. Then suddenly, just as she had given up hope, her small fingers touched the key! And still the sleep-lost man did not feel her presence in the room.

Yet he dreamed of Molly Wardell—a troublesome dream which made him stir in his sleep. He nearly froze Molly with terror by rolling over on his left side and bringing his face directly opposite hers, his weight holding her hand now, still, under the feathers.

He must be waking! She squatted back on her heels, frozen with fright. Then, as he lay quite still, she slowly and cautiously withdrew the key.

Silence deepened in the room. Kit Bridger ceased to dream at all, and sank once more into deep sleep. He did not waken till his usual hour, just before dawn. Then, as with all healthy people, body and mind snapped into instant alertness. He flung the covers aside, walked to the window, stretched, then instinctively glanced toward the barn.

A curse leaped from his lips. The door of Ace's stall was wide open!

AT furious speed, Kit Bridger woke his men, allotted to them their ranch tasks, hurriedly got together the few things he wanted for the trail, and roped the horse next best to the golden stallion. Then, deaf to the warnings of his men not to follow the trail over the Rio Grande because of the turbulent condition of Mexico, Bridger took up his quest of vengeance and of recapture.

To regain Ace he would follow that trail through the whole length of Mexico, he swore to himself, cursing Curt Jones in one breath and in another certain horse rustlers whom he half suspected to be the guilty parties.

He had one advantage which Molly Wardell did not think of—there had been a hard rain the day before, which

made trailing easy. And Kit Bridger had another advantage which he himself did not suspect. The thief riding the golden stallion knew nothing of the route Curt had ridden. It was for this reason that Molly, riding out of her way and then into the right direction again, handicapped her flight to such an extent that on the second day of her desperate ride she looked up from the floor of a gorge and, to her terror, saw a pursuing horseman riding down the trail above her.

She should have broken into instant flight. As it was, she believed that the man above had not seen her. Whereupon she cut across the floor of the gorge to hide in a ravine which ran deep into the west side of the gloomy place.

Kit Bridger, not daring to hope that the thief was really riding for the cut, snatched his rifle from the boot, raised it to his shoulder, and took steady aim at the fleeing figure. The man on that horse was just about Curt Jones' size, small and slender. Yes, it was Curt, and to hell with him! Because he valued a snarling quarreler like Lin Derry, was that any reason why Kit Bridger should lose the one thing which still made life bright for him—the magnificent stallion Curt rode?

Kit knew he could not miss. The shot was well within his rifle range. He had killed mountain sheep at a much greater distance under much greater difficulties. His trigger-finger hugged closer, closer—pulled the trigger.

Only a snap answered him. In haste, he examined the rifle and found that when the key had been stolen from under his pillow, the thief had paused on the way out to ruin the mechanism of the weapon. No doubt he had carried it out into the hall for that purpose, where the faint sounds he made could not be heard.

Kit Bridger jammed the rifle back into its boot, then almost uttered a yell of triumph, for he saw the thief turn into the cut. The fool thought he was hiding there! Well, let him think so.

Bridger rode down into the gorge at furious speed, then galloped hard along the floor, but kept straight ahead as though he were going to pass the arroyo east of the mouth. Even yet, if the thief darted out at the top speed of the golden stallion, he might escape, should Bridger happen to miss him with his short gun.

As the rancher drew even with the mouth of the ravine, he saw no signs of the horse-thief issuing forth. So he whirled his mount, crossed the gorge floor in a flash, and was in the ravine, gun in hand.

The mouth was almost choked by a huge boulder. Bridger rounded this with reckless indifference, then checked his mount to a sliding halt, for beyond him, at the head of the cut, in plain sight, stood Ace—broadside to his master because the thief, hearing the clatter of hoofs, had instantly used him for a shield.

Kit Bridger flung himself from the saddle, advanced a few steps, and halted. He called out scornfully, "Come out from behind that horse, yuh dirty coward! Step aside to the right a couple of yards. I'll promise yuh an even break."

But the thief didn't come out.

Bridger snapped, "Yuh damn fool, don't yuh know yore legs are showin'? I can shoot the feet off yuh any minute!"

Still not a sound, nor any movement from the feet. Kit Bridger whistled. At the sharp, imperious sound, a signal he had been sternly trained to obey, Ace plunged against the reins. Angered by their restraint, he reared, pivoted, flung his whole weight against the leathers. Jerking away from the horse-thief, he rushed to his master, mane and tail floating triumphantly, eyes gleaming.

To the astonishment of Bridger, Curt Jones, instead of going for his gun, had crumpled on the ground, gauntleted hands over his face and sobs, apparently, shaking his shoulders.

For a second Kit Bridger looked in amazed contempt at the desolate figure. Then he realized this couldn't be Curt

Jones—probably some Mexican boy who had been hired to rustle the stallion. He called out impatiently, "Get up, yuh young coyote, and come here! I'm not goin' to hurt yuh, now I've got the horse."

The figure rose, came warily toward him. His amazement deepened as he saw the pale, tear-wet face of Molly Wardell.

Kit Bridger jammed his gun back into its holster and strode toward her. The two stood looking into each other's eyes.

"For Pete's sake!" he demanded roughly. "What's the answer to all this?"

"Lin's death," she answered, struggling against the sobs in her throat. "Now yuh've got the horse, he'll have to die."

"Where's the rest of yore gang?" His voice was harsh, angry.

"There never was anyone but me. No one else cared enough to take any risks."

"Yuh mean," he asked, his eyes widening in sheer amazement, "that yuh were going alone, with my horse, to swap him—or fancying yuh could swap him—for Lin Derry?"

She nodded assent. "It's all spoiled now," she muttered.

She swayed. He fancied she was about to fall, sprang forward and swept her into his arms with a rush of pitying tenderness. "Yuh brave little fool!"

The unexpected sympathy of his tone, the gentleness and strength combined in his clasp, suddenly weakened her gallant courage. Against her enemy's shoulder she rested quietly, too worn from the tense anxiety and fatigue of the past few days to marvel at her own reaction.

Her hat, held by its thong, had fallen back on her shoulder. Kit Bridger looked down on the ruffled glory of her hair. Her face was hidden now against his shoulder. Poor kid! She loved this Lin, he thought, as he himself had once idealized and loved a woman, only to find that love mocked and betrayed.

"Molly," he said gently, "we'll camp here a bit. We both need some food, and here's a spring handy. Let's try not to think of anythin' right now but restin' the horses and gettin' a little grub ourselves."

She raised her head, nodded bravely, accepting with forced composure the task of helping him prepare the meal. She noted, with a bitter little sigh, that he had taken no chances on her grabbing the stallion, after all. Both horses were hobbled and left to graze clean outside the mouth of the ravine where they could find sweet grasses along the meanderings of the spring's stream.

She felt revived and strengthened as the meal progressed, not only by the food and drink but by some subtle stimulus she felt from his presence. Kit Bridger himself was strangely disturbed. The charm and challenge of this girl, her amazing courage, her loveliness, stirred new depths in his being.

He had hated Lin Derry before, in an impatient, casual way; but now his hate of Derry was hot. That she should be willing to risk her life—and more than her life—for that savage-tempered, blundering fool! He said, a trifle hoarsely, "Did yuh fancy that if yuh delivered the stallion to Yznaga, you yoreself would be allowed to return home? A girl as . . . as beautiful as you?"

"I didn't intend that the Mexicans should ever know I'm a girl," she said naively. "Can't yuh see how carefully I'm dressed to look like a man?"

"Yuh wouldn't fool any man with eyes in his head, Molly. Yo're feminine from the top of yore head to the sole of yore feet. It sings in that sweet voice of yores, and when yuh move—no man could be so graceful."

"You talk like that, who hate me?"

"I don't hate yuh. I wish I did. In that case I wouldn't mind yuh calling me what yuh've called yore father and all the men yuh counted as friends of yores—cowards. Yuh've no right to think them cowards because they didn't want to commit suicide, as you tried to do." He rose, commanding curtly, "Help me get up the horses! It's time to be

moving. Quite a ways from here to yore father's house."

Tears sprang again to her eyes. They were going home, ignominiously, and Lin down there in Mexico! She moved a little blindly towards the horses. He strode beside her, apparently not noticing her tears.

When they were both mounted, she on the black, he on the gleaming splendor of the golden stallion, he said curtly:

"Beat it home as fast as yuh can. Tell yore dad I've gone down into Mexico. I'll see what I can do for Lin. I'll take the one chance there is of saving him—not through that precious Yznaga, but through a little idea of my own."

She was now as amazed as he had been when she first stood revealed to him in the arroyo. Then she said, in steady, quiet tones, "Do yuh think I'd let yuh go down there alone?"

"Yuh'll do just what I tell yuh!" he countered savagely. "Get going! Beat it!"

For a moment she stared full into his eyes. Then slowly she turned the black and rode north.

He himself struck south, and tried to keep from glancing in her direction again. He did not turn his head for half a mile, until he was out of the gorge and riding along a plain. Then, looking back, he saw Molly on the black horse, calmly following him.

He drove her back. She obeyed him with the same meekness she had shown before. But no sooner had he put some distance between them than, looking back, he again discovered her following. When he had driven her back in vain, for the third time, he rode to meet her and looked at her with mingled respect, admiration and exasperation.

"It's no use," she said, smiling. "I'm going along—let's say as a boy yuh've hired." She added hurriedly, as she saw the frown between his eyes darkening ominously, "I'll mind every word yuh say. If yuh tell me to hide in the bushes, I'll hide, and yuh fight all the Mexicans yuh want alone."

He couldn't help grinning. "Yo're not all there!" he said.

"A lunatic with yuh is better than nothing. And, if yuh keep on turning me back, yuh'll only waste a lot of time."

He groaned, then suddenly said savagely, "If yuh don't turn back as I'm tellin' yuh, if yuh don't go straight to yore father, I'll ride home myself. Lacking Ace, yuh couldn't do anythin'."

"Oh, yes, I could," she said steadily. "I can go and beg for Lin's life. And if that's all I can do, I'll do that."

"God knows you are crazy. But come on! Only, if yuh disobey a single order of mine—"

"I give yuh leave to beat me," she said almost gaily.

MILE after mile slipped beneath the feet of their horses as they moved steadily south. Night fell. Night passed.

Day after day, night after night, slipped by like black beads on a chain of terror. Or so they should have been. Yet somehow, strangely enough, they went only too fast for these two, who thought they would never again be together.

They had good luck on the weather, and good luck in being able to buy grain now and then at some isolated hamlet. Some time ago they had left the Rio behind them and now were pushing down into that ancient, dangerous country which never knows real peace. Kit's fluent Mexican Spanish was a great help to them. But the beauty of the stallion and his striking color were always a danger. Yet for one thing Kit was thankful. The magnificence of his horse drew the eyes of the greedy onlookers away from the seeming youth who rode beside him, and she continued to pass for a boy.

It seemed to Bridger now that he had known her always. And, he said to himself with sudden bitterness, had loved her always. But that love would perhaps not torment him long. He had a hunch he would be killed down there in releasing Lin Derry. And grimly, he

said to himself, maybe it was better so. For he realized with every passing hour that he, who seemed to be master on this journey, was in reality body and soul captive to Molly Wardell.

At last, just as night was closing in, there appeared before them the lights of the Mexican town they sought. It lay in a small valley around which swept frowning cliffs. The place was open to access in only two directions. This included the trail they were following now.

They halted above the town, looking down upon it. Here they would remain, Kit Bridger explained, until two o'clock. And he elaborated fully the plan he had in mind. Falling back among the thick trees, they made themselves as comfortable as they could, gave the horses what little grain remained at the cantles, and settled down to waiting.

Bridger now told her that he knew this section well. He himself had been down here buying cattle, before this recent revolution had broken out.

Hour after hour passed. Through a little vista in the trees Molly saw the lights of the town go out, one after the other. And suddenly it seemed to her that those lights had been stars of hope —hope that was now cruelly vanishing.

She had pitted Kit Bridger not only against the people of the town—the jailer, the sentinel sure to be outside—she had also pitted him against Yznaga and all his men. Wrapped in her terror and pity for Lin, she had thought of nothing else. But now she did think most fully of Kit Bridger's side of the game, and it suddenly came upon her like a chill wave how right her father had been!

She and Kit were sitting on the ground beside each other, leaning against a ledge of rock. One small hand flew out in the starlit darkness and caught Bridger's hand in a quick, convulsive clasp. Her sweet voice, hoarse with anxiety, murmured brokenly, startling him by its emotion. "I'm sending yuh to yore death. It's all useless and terrible. Lin brought this on himself. I see now how right Dad was. There's no use in yore dying, too...Let's turn back!"

Bridger knew instinctively that she was not thinking of herself. In all the misery and distress she had suffered during the past days, her frantic anxiety had been always for someone else. Bridger's arm went round her, crushing her close to his side. His own voice was hoarse with feeling. "Molly, I never dreamed of a girl like you. But quit worrying. Believe that I'll put it through. And if I don't . . ."

"And if yuh don't!" She shivered.

". . . then remember yore promise to me," he said. "Yuh'll cut out for home as fast as ever Ace can carry yuh."

ANOTHER hour!

And now the sentinel at the jail sullenly wondered why the relief on his beat was late. Was Juan drinking again? Had he forgotten he was due here, now? If only this gringo dog, there in the jail, had been shot at once, as he should have been, the jail would have been empty and no sentinel work would have to be done.

His reflections were broken by the clear call of a quail which came from a fringe of bushes near the broken-down wall of the jail yard. Something must have disturbed the bird to make it call at night, thought the sentinel. If only it would come into the open and he could see its small body moving along, he might be able to kill it with a rock; he was very fond of quail. He wouldn't dare to fire at it, for that would alarm the town.

He moved a little nearer to the fringe of bushes, his whole mind bent upon getting the quail which had come so opportunely to break the maddening monotony of his beat. The quail whistled boldly. It was coming nearer still.

Softly he laid down his rifle and reached for a small stone. Then, as he flattened out on the ground like a dead bat, astride of him dropped Kit Bridger, warning him in Spanish not to utter a sound.

"Now, listen!" whispered Kit, close to the fellow's ear. "Yuh'll rise. Yuh'll go to the jail door. Knock loudly, and say there's a messenger out here from General Yznaga to see the jailer. Obey, an' yuh won't be hurt. Fail in the slightest degree, dog, and yuh die!"

"Señor, señor!" whispered the sentinel quite distinctly. "I have no desire to die. I will obey every word that the señor commands."

Disturbed by the loud pounding on the jail door, the jailer arose sullenly and demanded through it, "Who is there? What do you desire?"

Glibly enough the sentinel explained, just as he had been told to do. The jailer shrugged; no doubt Yznaga was about to execute the gringo privately. And a good thing if he did, thought the jailer. He opened the door and admitted both the sentinel and the man whom he supposed to be the messenger.

Beyond them, in the furthest cell of the jail, Lin Derry heard that knocking, and interpreted it just as the jailer had done. He was about to die. Yznaga was weary of keeping him. He had broken his pledge to give Curt Jones time to return with the stallion. But no; there had been time, and there had been no stallion.

At last, in humiliation and despair, Lin Derry had begun to realize how little he had taught men to value him, how unlikely it was not only that Kit Bridger would be willing to part with his horse, but also how most unlikely that any mass rescue would be attempted—especially in the present state of ferment in Mexico. If he had only kept his head about those lousy cattle! But then when, in the past few years, had he ever kept his head?

Well, he was about to die. And he would die bravely.

He heard the tramp of approaching feet, folded his arms, threw back his head and, standing beside his window, bravely faced the opening door, his pale blue eyes quite steady, his full, passionate lips firm. In this hour, Derry wore a real dignity.

But it vanished as he stepped forward to meet, not Yznaga's soldiers, but the amazing presence of Kit Bridger—his enemy. He knew instantly that Bridger had not come here to do him any harm; that was not necessary. Bridger would only have needed to leave that to the scant time remaining before Derry faced execution.

"The jailer and the sentinel are in the jailer's office, knocked out and gagged," explained Bridger curtly. "Here's a belt and gun for yuh. Follow me close. I've got horses. . . . Damn it! Don't waste time thankin' me! Be quiet!"

He hurried Derry on before him out of the jail door, locked it and thrust the keys into his own belt. In the shadow of the bushes fringing the trail the amazed Derry saw not two horses, but three. The central one was Ace, the golden stallion, with Molly riding him. On each side of her was a led horse. These were fresh animals which Kit Bridger had picked out of Yznaga's own remuda grazing in a paddock nearby, reflecting ironically to himself that both he and Molly were horse-thieves now.

Lin Derry broke out into exclamations at sight of Molly. Again Kit Bridger savagely cut him off. They mounted hurriedly, and were about to turn north when Bridger halted them.

"Listen!"

A detail of mounted men, probably Yznaga's, was coming southward along the trail they should be on. At Bridger's order, each rider leaned forward, putting a swift hand over the nostrils of his horse. Then suddenly the horse Lin Derry rode reared in fright.

A man broke out from the thick scrub near him, rushed toward the jail, yelling and firing his gun as he went. It was the relief, the missing Juan who should have been there half an hour ago, but who, as Pedro had surmised, had stopped for an extra drink. Yet he was not too drunk to realize that the gringo prisoner was escaping!

They could no longer ride north. They must escape through the south exit, Bridger knew. At his word of

command the horses sprang forward, and they raced past the demoralized sentinel who was battering vainly on the jail door. On into the sleeping town they went, where lights already were beginning to spring up. Dogs were barking wildly, clamor and confusion coming to light everywhere.

The maudlin condition of the relief sentinel had saved them from any bullets from his gun. But now, as they thundered through the town, more than one rifle snarled, more than one bullet sung past them. The detail of soldiers would, of course, gallop to the jail first, and would undoubtedly have sense enough to realize that the three on horseback would make for the south exit, since they had been cut off from the north.

Molly felt thankful when they were past the clamor of the village. Somehow she didn't mind the bullets as much as she minded the wild barking of the dogs. There was something sinister in their chorus, as though they presaged certain death.

At the furious pace they were keeping, it did not take them long to arrive at the second exit. Prehistoric forces had torn a gaping rent in the mountain. If that rent had been deeper a river would have flowed into the valley, would have made a lake where the town lay now. But the rent was not deep enough and the river outside the pass shouldered close by it, cutting off all exit except for the bridge, ramshackle and so narrow horses must pass over it in defile.

The walls of the river pitched sheer down on the town side; opposite, fifty yards beyond the bridge, was a place where a horse might scramble out.

They thundered across, but on the other bank Kit Bridger paused. Molly and Lin Derry watched him with anxious curiosity.

"Hell!" snarled Lin Derry. "What yuh hangin' round here for? Yznaga's men will be on that bridge in a few minutes! It's bad enough for yuh to have dragged a girl like Molly into this, without riskin' her life any more than yuh can help!"

"Lin!" cried Molly angrily. "Let me tell yuh—!"

But Kit Bridger cut them both off short. "Leave him alone, Molly! What difference does it make what he thinks? I want yore riatas—or wait! I want yore horse. This one I'm ridin' has speed, plenty of it, but I'll need my stallion's strength for what I'm goin' to do.

"Give me the riata on yore saddle, Derry—and the one from yores Molly," he added, for they had now exchanged horses. "That gives me three. I think I can swing what I'm after. Now, Molly, yuh promised to obey orders! Beat it, you and Lin!"

"Oh, Kit!" wailed the girl. "I'd rather—"

"Damn yuh!" almost snarled Kit Bridger. "Will yuh go!"

She turned and galloped away, the rhythm of her horse's feet mingling with her sobbing. Galloping alongside of her, Lin Derry gazed at her, his hate of Kit Bridger deepening with every moment. That Bridger had saved him only made things much worse. He would not dare to quarrel again with Kit Bridger.

Lin Derry felt no hell could be worse than posing as grateful to the man he wanted to kill. And yet such a pose he would be forced to keep.

They were topping a small rise now. Disobedient, Molly halted and looked back. Her face went white. She gasped, "Lin! Look! He's gone back over the bridge! Oh, God! Lin, what's he doing?"

Unwillingly enough, Lin Derry halted beside her. They both wheeled their horses and sat, looking toward the river.

"I know what he's doin'," growled Lin. "The supports on the town side of that bridge are rotten. Ace is as strong as two ordinary horses. This fellow Bridger is aimin' to drag the main support out from under the bridge, and wreck it."

"He mustn't! He shan't stop there!"

almost screamed Molly. "I'm going over there and make him come with us."

Lin Derry's hand shot out and caught her rein. "Stay where yuh are!" he snarled. "See—I told yuh. He's made a Dutch collar out of the third riata, to strengthen the horse's chances."

"Let go my rein!" shrieked Molly, "or I'll cut it!"

With a curse, Lin Derry let loose of it, and like a whirlwind she galloped back toward the bridge, with Lin at her side. As they reached it, the gleaming, magnificent body of the stallion was straining forward in a lunging, powerful pull, Kit Bridger, beside him, urging him on with his voice and a slight touch of his quirt.

"Kit!" screamed the girl. "For God's sake! Kit!"

He did not hear her. Heart and soul he was bent on his task, for which he had little time, if it were to be accomplished. The soldiers of Yznaga were already firing at the rear, yelling as they came.

But now an encouraging, cracking sound came from the rotten main support of the bridge on that side. For years it had been in bad condition; for years the town had known it should be mended. But always it was to be done *mañana*. And now, thanks to that dilatory attitude, the rotten wood suddenly gave way. The town side of the bridge crashed into the water.

But bullets were whistling like hail around the destroyer of the town's causeway. Kit had no time to loosen the bridge riata. He cut it with the flash of his knife, then whirled the stallion toward the unfordable, sheer bank, driving in his spurs. Molly hid her eyes as man and horse arched into the air.

Below Kit Bridger lay a pool. How deep it was he did not know. If it were too shallow both he and the stallion would die. If it were deep enough. . . .

The falling horse hit the center of the water with a tremendous splash. Flying spray seemed to hide them both, although in reality it was the water which hid them. The pool was very deep, and man and horse went completely under.

They rose, and on the shelving side of the pool, nearest Molly, passed into shallow water and made for the break on the bank where they might scramble out. Toward that break Molly galloped wildly, for rifle fire was pouring around Kit Bridger, and she saw no chance for him whatever. In that moment she felt that she would share death with him gladly.

Yet he came out unscathed, and in five minutes the yelling, cursing mob of soldiery in the rear could be heard no longer.

"We've got a fighting chance now," Kit Bridger announced. "By the time they get back to the north exit and cut around to where we are, we'll have had a start of miles. The river isn't fordable again until yuh've gone a long way."

"Yo're sure yo're not shot? Anywhere? Yo're not hit at all?" persisted Molly, anxiously. "It seems impossible that yuh weren't—"

"I'm not hurt," reiterated Kit Bridger. Then sharply: "But somebody else is! Look!"

He wheeled his horse around her, as she was riding between them, and caught Lin Derry just as he was slipping from the saddle.

Dismounting, he laid Derry at length on the sod, tore open his shirt, and with a start of surprise wondered that he had kept the saddle as far as he had gone. There was a gaping wound in his chest. He must have been caught by the gunfire as they were leaving the town.

Lin Derry looked up. "I'm goin', Molly. They got me. . . . Kiss. . . ."

She bent above him. Her lips touched his just as his last sigh came.

Ahead of them lay a long and cruel trail. They could not stop to bury Lin, nor could they carry him for days and nights ahead. Kit Bridger said gently that on the trail he would pay the Mexicans at some hamlet to go back and do for them and for Lin what they could not do now.

There followed long days, long nights

of desperate riding, of twisting and turning, and then, like a miracle, the Rio Grande appeared.

Back on American soil the tension lifted.

As they rode along Molly said slowly, "Kit, I know now that the love I had for poor Lin was the kind a sister gives to her brother. Not the kind I feel for . . . ." She broke off, flushing.

He pressed his horse close to hers. His arm went round her shoulder, drawing her toward him. "Not the kind that yuh'll give Kit Bridger, who's goin' to be yore husband," he announced firmly.

She sighed happily.

He added, with a grin, "But thinkin' of all the times yuh've disobeyed me, Molly, I reckon yo're goin' to make a plumb disobedient wife!"

THE PUNCHER'S SLOGAN

By S. OMAR BARKER

"LAUGH and the world laughs with you,
Weep and you weep alone";

But you ain't got time fer neither,
Straddlin' a bronco roan!

Every cloud's got silver
Fer linin', says the poet—

Bouncin' on top of a bronco,
Who's got time to know it?

The man worth while, they tell me
Smiles at the roughest jolts—

The *smile* ain't most important,
Snappin' out bronco colts!

Too many mottoes an' slogans
Kinder gits under my hide.

This un's enough fer the puncher:
"Git on 'im, boy an' *ride!*"

The Girl and the Guitar

By C. Wiles Hallock

Here's ol' Pete Carberry, well known hereabouts as a first-class matchmaker. Although he claims to be top-hand to Cupid, things ain't always as smooth along the path of love as Pete would like to make them.

WHEN I joined up with Jared Arrondale's outfit over in Elko County, I had hopes of fulfillin' a long-cherished dream. As far back as I kin remember, I've nursed a ardent yearnin' to play on the guitar. Waal—young Jerry Arrondale was one of the highfalutinest guitar-twangers ever I heard. Bein' as I was foreman of the Arrondale spread, with Jerry my top-hand, I figgered mebbe my crave to strum the *Spanish Fandango* and *Juan-iter* and other heart-warmin' tunes would be realized.

But I guess Fate didn't decree for me to twang guitar strings, though Jerry seemed willin' enough to give me lessons when I asked him. We was ridin' over Pardo way one bright May mornin' to see if there was some cattle cars on the railway sidin' there. Jerry'd been playin' and singin' in the bunkhouse the night before and a rip-roarin' time was had by all.

"I shore admire the way you wrangle the guitar, laddie," says I. "It's downright inspirin' the way you render that *Spanish Cavalier* ballad!"

"Heck, Pete, 'tain't nothin' to speak about," says Jerry, grinnin' broad and flushin' up. He was a big, brawny rannigan with curly black hair and flashin' blue eyes.

"It's plumb scrumptious, if you ask me," says I. "Boy, almost since childhood's earliest hour I've had me a secret longin' to whang on a guitar like you do. S'pose you could learn me to strum a few ditties?"

Jerry let out a roarin' laugh. "You're durned tootin' I could, you old maverick!" he yelps. "If you got a ear for music, I can learn you to play chords and you can set and howl *Home on the Range* and *The Cowboy's Lament* to a fare-you-well! I'll start workin' on you tonight after supper."

But as luck would have it, we come joggin' past the district schoolhouse just then, and less'n a second after Jerry spoke, two piercin' screams split the ozone. We wheeled our hosses round, and before we was out of our saddles, nine young'uns come shriekin' from the schoolhouse, followed by the teacher.

"What's up?" yelled Jerry, runnin' to'rds 'em with me right at his heels.

"A snake!" cried the teacher, wide-eyed and tremblin' with terror. "A huge rattler—coiled up behind the stove!" She swayed and would've fell in a heap if Jerry hadn't gripped her arms. She was all aquiver, so Jerry just lifted her in his arms and carried her to a bench under a big pine tree in the school yard.

"Just set quiet and calm yourself!" he said, puttin' her on the bench and fannin' her with his hat.

"I'll 'tend to Mister Snake!" says I, rushin' into the schoolhouse. Shore 'nuff, there was a reptile coiled up behind the stove, but 'twasn't no rattler, so I picked it up and went to the door and yelled:

"Your visitor ain't no rattlesnake, miss; just a bullsnake—plumb harmless!"

I hated to kill the pore thing, but I knowed that pretty schoolma'am would worry herself sick wonderin' if it might come back again, so I took it up into a little gully behind the schoolhouse and done away with it. The little boys follered and watched me bury it. When I come back to the tree, Jerry was settin' on the bench beside the little lady, gazin' with admirin' eyes at the glossy sheen of her dark, wavy hair.

"Hope you're feelin' better now, miss!" he said. "You needn't have been scared, though. Them reptiles is meek and gentle—they keep the rattlers away."

"Anyhow, that one won't never bother you no more," I chimed in.

"Thank you a thousand times!" she said in tremblin' tones, givin' us a flashin' smile. She had big, brown eyes with a pleadin', lingerin' glow in 'em that made you ketch your breath when she leveled 'em straight at you.

"Guess we'd ought to interduce ourselves," said Jerry, risin' up. "I'm Jerry Arrondale from the Arrondale ranch, southeast of here—and this here's Pete Carberry." I bowed to the lady.

"I am Ruth Woodstock," she said, blushin' pretty. "I don't know how to thank you, gentlemen, for your timely assistance."

"You don't have to thank us for nothin'," cried Jerry. "I'm mighty glad to know you, Miss Woodstock!" He laughed hearty. "You was plenty upset!"

"I was near fainting," said the girl. "It was silly of me."

"Say, I don't blame you a-tall!" cried Jerry. "I get shaky just like you did, when I meet up with a rattler." He set down beside her again. The little lady give him one of her pleadin' looks, smilin' gorgeous. He gazed into her big brown eyes and sighed. Looked like they was hypnotizin' each other. To anybuddy that's been mixed up in as many matchmakin' contracts as what I've been, it was a plain case of mutual beguilement,

you might say. It was one of them times when three is a crowd, so I says:

"Think I'll go take a look around. Mebbe I kin find the place where that varmint got in at. Come on, kids, let's investigate." I went in the school, with all the little folks follerin' me, and it didn't take me long to locate a big knot-hole in the floor right back of the stove. So I plugged it up with a willow saplin'.

Jerry and Miss Woodstock was at the door when I finished the job. "I'm quite myself now," she said, "so I must get back to school-teaching." She shook hands with us cordial, sayin', "Thank you again for killing the snake—and I am pleased to have met you!" The way she smiled into Jerry's eyes, I knowed she was more'n half hopin' she'd have some more snake trouble and he'd come ridin' by again, just in the nick of time.

"I'm lopin' down to Elko to fetch mail," said Jerry. "Is there anything I could bring you, comin' back?"

"No, thanks," she said, real sweet. "Good-by!"

"So long! Mebbe—mebbe I'll stop by anyhow," says Jerry. She just laughed and went inside.

Now, we hadn't had no intentions of foggin' down to Elko, which it was clean out of our way. The lad was tryin' to figger out some excuse for callin' on the little lady again. So I says, "I'll go and see about them cattle cars whilst you're lopin' after the mail. And you might inquire in regards to Miss Woodstock's mail, too. Might be she's expectin' a important letter, which you could deliver it to her!"

"Pete, you're a smart feller!" he chuckles. "A very smart feller, indeed!" He give me a wink and went dustin' down the road to'rds Elko, singin':

'School days, school days,
Dear ol' golden rule days. . . ."

That night after supper Jerry didn't make no move to git out his guitar and start learnin' me how to pluck chords. When the other boys asked him to play a few tunes he begged off, sayin' he didn't feel good. Course I knowed what was eatin' on him, so I follered him when he up and charged out of the bunkhouse.

"Waal, boy," says I, "did you find any important letters for Miss Woodstock down to Elko?"

"No, I didn't," says he, sighin' heavy. "If there'd been any mail for her, I could have rode up to the schoolhouse and seen her again, and mebbe got better acquainted with her and found out where she lives. But I didn't have nerve enough to just drop in on her empty-handed. Gosh! That little gal gets to me, Pete! She shore gets to me!" He sighed like a dyin' calf.

"Yeah, I noticed," says I.

"But how am I gonna manage?" he groans.

"What d'you mean?" says I.

"I mean you gotta help me figger out some way to see her again. I can't go callin' on her 'less I got some good reason for showin' up. And besides, I gotta have some excuse to git away from the ranch, or else Dad'll land all over me for not bein' on the job. Can't you figger out some good excuse for sendin' me over Pardo way, and also a reason for droppin' in on Miss Woodstock? After I find out where she lives, I can call on her of evenin's, but until then—you see what I mean?"

"I'm ketchin' on," says I. "But if I know anything about the meanin' of a gal's tender glances, that little teacher'd be plumb delighted to see you if you didn't have no more cause to knock on her door than just to ask for a drink of water. I kin manage gittin' you away from here okeh, providin' you don't abuse the privilege. I gotta do right by your dad and the rest of the hands—you know that."

"Just gimme one privilege, Pete," says he, with tears in his voice. "I'll work extra hard to make up for it!"

"All right," says I. "I'll think up some way to git you and your teacher together. Meanwhile, you go back to the bunkhouse and give the boys a treat with your guitar-playin'."

So he went and hauled out his guitar and sang and played for us. But he didn't put his heart into it. His thoughts was all wanderin' over Pardo way, and instead of givin' us merry, upliftin' ditties, he drummed and droned out melancholy strains, such as *In the Gloamin'* and *Nellie Was a Lady* and:

"You made me wot I am today,
I hope yo're satisfied. . . ."

Now I was plumb eager to boost along this buddin' romance, 'cause the one thing in life I admire equal with buckarooin' is bein' top-hand and round-up boss for Dan Cupid. So I made up my mind to sort of scout ahead and pave the way for this pair. There was a rambunctious steer on the spread, plumb ornery and worthless 'cept for rodeo-showin' purposes, which was the only reason why old man Arrondale kept him around. He was kept in a pasture lot close by the corrals, and every now and again he'd ram through the fence and go rangin'. So I ambled over to the pasture lot that night before retirin', busted the fence, chased the critter out and run him a ways in the direction of Pardo.

Next mornin' I says to old man Arrondale, "Old Pandemonium's broke loose again. I don't aim to take none of the hands off their chores to round him up, though. I'll go git him myself."

The old man growled some, but didn't put up no argument. I forked my bronc and started off. Jerry come foggin' after me.

"Where you headin'?" says he, lookin' terrible woebegone.

"I'm workin' on a scheme," says I. "I'm gonna fix things so's you kin call on your lady friend tomorrow. Now—say! D'you s'pose you could mebbe start learnin' me a thing or two about guitar-twangin' this evenin'?"

"Oh, shore!" he boomed. "I'd plumb forgot. I'll learn you to play the G chord tonight. Gosh! I kin see her tomorrow, huh?"

"Yep—shore as shootin'!" says I, dustin' away. I was all excited myself, thinkin' 'bout learnin' to play that there G chord. I headed northwest to'rds Pardo and hunted all over for that dang-rammed steer, but didn't see hide nor hair of him I got to the schoolhouse 'bout noon. When the kids come out to play and eat their lunches under the big pine tree, I went up and banged on the door. The little teacher seemed right glad to see me.

"You ain't seen nothin' of a ornery-lookin' steer rangin' round these parts, have you?" says I.

"No, I haven't," she says, smilin' sweet.

"I didn't s'pose you had," says I, "but I thought I'd stop in and ask if you'd had any more reptile trouble."

"No, we haven't seen any more snakes," says she, laughin' merry. "Come in, Mr. Carberry. I'm just eating my lunch. Won't you share this piece of cake with me?"

"I'd admire to set and chat with you a few minutes," says I, goin' inside, "but I couldn't take your cake, thanks. Now, if it was Jerry, 'stead of me, he couldn't resist your temptin' offer. He's terrible fond of sweets!"

Miss Woodstock's cheeks turned a shade pinker, and that pleadin', lingerin' glow come into her eyes when I mentioned Jerry's name.

"How's the school work comin' along?" says I. Whilst I was talkin' I slipped my gauntlets off and hung 'em on one of the rungs of the chair I was settin' on.

"Most of the children are doing very well, Mr. Carberry," says she. "They're nice youngsters, so we're getting along just fine. We've been extra busy this week, preparing an entertainment program for next Friday afternoon. It's a very thrilling experience for the children."

"I'm bettin' it would be thrillin' to see them young'uns perform," says I.

"I'm afraid they aren't going to have an audience," says Miss Woodstock. "Their parents are too busy to take an interest in such things."

Them words give me a sudden, bright

idear. "Say," I says, "if it's a audience you crave, I know a couple of parties you could count on. I and Jerry would come a-whoopin' if you was to invite us!"

"Do you really mean it?" cried the gal, flushin' up.

"I shore do!" says I. "What's more, if you was to crave some extra-special entertainin' for your program, you could git Jerry to give the young'uns a very nice surprise." And I told her 'bout his guitar-playin'. "Say! You oughta hear him twang them strings and warble *La Palomy* and *When the Harvest Days Is Over, Jessie Dear!*"

"Oh, Mr. Carberry—that would be *gr-a-and!*" cries the little lady, clappin' her hands. "Do you think Jerry—er, Mr. Arrondale—would do it?"

"Miss Woodstock," says I, very solemn, "Jerry would do anything in the world for you. When you git to know him real good, you'll find he's a wonderful young feller. He'll be tickled pink to play his guitar on your program—take my word for it!"

"Oh!" sighed the little lady. Then she laughed, and her eyes glowed like stars. She picked up a piece of her cake and wrapped it up careful in a paper napkin.

"Here," she cried, holding the cake out to me, "take this to Mr. Jerry, with my very best wishes. Tell him I invite him to the school program Friday afternoon—and say I implore him to bring his guitar and play for me and the children!" She laughed beautiful.

"I shore will!" says I. "And you can count on him comin'. He'll be here—guitar and all."

"Of course you're invited, too," she cried, as I went out.

"Thanks, kindly," says I. "Mebbe Jerry might be over this way tomorrow. Mebbe he might stop in and talk over the program with you."

"I hope so," she said, with a deep sigh and a dazzlin' smile. "I think that would be fine." As I piled into my saddle, she cried, "Good-by! I hope you find your cow!"

I WENT lookin' for Pandemonium down Elko way. Figgered I might as well pick up the mail, bein' I was so near to town. I didn't run acrost the crazy steer, but it didn't worry me none. 'Twasn't no killin' matter if he did run around loose for a spell. When I got to Elko, I blowed into Mike Leary's refreshment parlor, before goin' to the post office, to git me a lemon sody. Whilst I was guzzlin' it a feller come in and bought a pack of cigarettes. He was a total stranger to Mike and me—a middle-aged, mean-lookin' party with slicked black hair and dressed like a big town dude. Also he was likkered up tighter'n a tick.

"Where'sh the post office?" he growled, swayin' back and forth.

"Down the street a coupla blocks," says I. "I'm goin' there pretty soon—I'll show you where 'tis."

"Here," he says, pullin' a letter out of his pocket. "Mail this." He handed me the missive and staggered out without so much as a "Thank you."

"Okeh, stranger!" says I, shovin' the letter into my hip pocket.

"That maverick's been snoopin' round here since mornin'," says Mike. "He don't belong in Nevady—not in these parts, anyhow."

I went and got the mail after chinnin' with Mike a few minutes, then lit out for home. I looked careful for Pandemonium, but he wasn't nowheres around.

That night right after supper, Jerry and me took a walk and I give him the piece of cake Miss Woodstock sent to him, which it was kind of mashed up, account of me havin' to carry it in the breast pocket of my shirt. And also I give him the gal's message.

"Gosh, Pete," says the lad, all choked up, "I don't know how I kin ever make it up to you for what you've done for me!"

"Shucks, boy," says I, "all you gotta do is learn me somethin' about guitar-twangin'. I'd admire to git started on that G chord you said you'd show me. Next payday, I'm gonna lope over to

Elko and buy me the best durned guitar I kin find!"

So we went to the bunkhouse and he got out his insterment and showed me how to hold it. Then he told me the names of the strings and showed me how to press the two outside strings down on the third fret with my left hand and pluck with my right.

"That there's the first position of the G chord," he said. "You practise on it awhile. Pluck gentle—don't pull the strings out by the roots!"

'Twasn't near as easy to do as it looked, but it shore was fun! It got me so excited I was all lathered up with perspiration. I yanked my handkerchief out of my hip pocket to mop my brow. Somethin' else popped out and fell onto the floor. Like a flash I remembered about the letter that dude stranger gave me to mail—and I'd forgot to do same. I picked it up, looked at it—and almost fell off my bunk when I seen the name on the envelope! It was addressed to Miss Woodstock!

"What in thunder does it mean?" asked Jerry, when I told him how I come by it.

"It means you've gotta deliver this letter to the little lady when you see her tomorrow," says I. "In regards to the sneaky party which give it to me, I'm bettin' hosses to hotcakes she ain't nowise to blame for havin' to git it! But it ain't none of our business—and it ain't nothin' for you to git all wrought up over, neither." I picked up the guitar and started practisin' that first position of the G chord again.

That was just as far as I ever got, learnin' to play the guitar! Jerry just set gloomin' over that danged letter, too upset to pay any more attention to me that night. And things that transpired from then on kept him from ever givin' me any more lessons.

Next mornin' Jerry went over to the Pardo schoolhouse. I told his dad I'd sent him out lookin' for old Pandemonium, which I wasn't lyin' outright, 'cause I'd asked the boy to keep his eye peeled for the steer. When he got back, 'long about mid-afternoon, I jumped my hoss and we rode away from the other hands so's he could say what he craved to tell me.

"Gosh a'mighty, Pete," he yelped, "that ornery hombre is pesterin' Miss Woodstock some way! She was terrible upset when she read that there letter. She got pale as a ghost, and she was tremblin' when she finished readin' it. So I told her if she was needin' any help, she could count on me to stand by her through thick and thin!"

"What did she say to that?" says I.

"She said I was sweet," he muttered, colorin' up, "and she patted my hand. And she's gonna pull off that there program tomorrow afternoon,'stead of Friday. I'm bettin' it was on account of the danged letter that she changed the date, 'cause she said she feared Friday was gonna be an unlucky day for her."

"That bein' the case," says I, "me and you'll hafta scout around the Pardo schoolhouse on Friday, 'cause if that tough dude I seen down to Elko is on the little lady's trail, she'll be needin' help. D'you know where she lives?"

"Yeah—at the Rudolph ranch, a mile west of Pardo."

"Did you see anything of my gauntlets?"

"Yeah, I brung 'em to you!" He handed 'em over. Which I'd left 'em at the school on purpose, just to give him an excuse for stoppin' by sometime, when he couldn't think of no good reason for doin' same.

AT one-thirty o'clock Thursday afternoon, the lad and me was settin' side by side on the platform in the Pardo schoolhouse, all ready for the show. Jerry looked terrible solemn with his arms folded acrost his chest and his face flamin' red. Miss Woodstock was dressed up pretty, and she shore was a picture, standin' at her desk whilst the little folks filed in and took their places. But she was pale and nervous and showed plain enough that she was almighty worried 'bout somethin'. She rapped on her desk and said:

"Children, we are very pleased, of course, to have guests with us today, who have come to hear our program. I'm sure you all remember Mr. Carberry and Mr. Arrondale, who so kindly helped us the other morning with the snake." When she said them words, me and Jerry rose up and bowed. And whilst we was bowin', an ornery little red-headed kid in the back of the room whispered loud enough for everybuddy to hear:

"Teacher's got a feller!"

The room rang with uproar'ous mirth. Me and Jerry set, and Miss Ruth rapped for order again. "We will start the program at once," she said, speakin' so sharp that the laughin' stopped as sudden as it started. "We will stand and sing our opening song."

So the kids stood up and sang *America* right lusty, which Jerry and me joined in, and the pretty school teacher looked pleased.

Waal—after the patriotic salute, a boy 'bout fourteen come for'ard and spoke a very excitin' piece called *The Charge of the Light Brigade.* He was a ganglin' youth, but talented. He waved his arms and shouted and made a big to-do tellin' 'bout six hundred soldiers that got wiped out in Death Valley, which it was all news to me, and got me quite some wrought up. Then two or three others sang songs and spoke pieces, an' Miss Woodstock said:

"Now, children, I have a very grand surprise for you. Mr. Arrondale is going to entertain us with some music. He will play his guitar and sing for us. It was very kind of Mr. Arrondale to take part in our program, and I'm sure we will show our appreciation by keeping perfectly still." She give Jerry a sweet smile. He was all a-tremble with flusteration, but he done himself proud playin' the *Spanish Fandango.*

The young 'uns clapped and cheered, and Miss Woodstock give the lad such a sweet, yearnin' look, he almost bust into tears. So then he played and sang *The Spanish Cavalier* very sad and tender, gazin' straight at the little lady all the while. But when he was right in the middle of *The Glide Waltz,* there come a loud knock on the door.

Jerry stopped. Miss Ruth's face went white. "Excuse me, Mr. Arrondale," she murmured, "I believe we have another visitor!" She was all a-tremble as she passed in front of us to open the door. But before she reached it, the door swung open and a big feller, scowlin' grim as thunder, come stridin' in. It was the dude stranger I'd met up with down to Elko!

He was one of the meanest lookin' hombres ever I see. Without so much as a glance at Jerry and me, he follered the frightened little lady to her desk. "Get my letter?" he snarled, glarin' at the pore gal with a cold glint in his beady, black eyes.

"Yes," gasped Miss Woodstock, plumb terror-struck.

"Then you was expectin' me tomorrow!" He made a gruntin' sound, half laughin', half sneerin'. "Well, I figured you might try runnin' out on me, so I came today." He laughed again, tauntin'-like. "You're goin' back to Denver with me—see? We get out of Elko tonight. I got a rig outside—" He jerked his thumb to'rds the door.

Miss Ruth turned to the children. "We will not be able to finish our program," she said. "I am very sorry. School is dismissed—now. Please go—all of you—at once!"

The kids got up and straggled out. The tough party turned to me and Jerry for the first time and snarled, "You can go, too. Get out!"

"Mr. Bardonni—" cried the little teacher.

But Jerry spoke up before she could finish. "We're takin' orders from the lady!" he said, cool and calm, but his eyes was flashin' danger.

"Mr. Bardonni, these gentlemen are friends of mine," cried Miss Ruth. "I'd advise you to address them civilly. Furthermore, I'm not going to Denver, or anywhere else, with you—and that's final!"

The tough hombre walked over to us

and stood within two feet of Jerry, sneerin' insolent. We was on the platform, 'bout a foot higher than him. "Who are you mugs?" he growls. I was feelin' mighty uneasy, 'cause I knowed good and well this gent was a gun thug, and Jerry and me wasn't armed, because buckaroos just natcherly don't lug shootin'-irons with 'em to a school entertainment.

"We're a coupla fellers that kills snakes around here," said Jerry. "I'm death on snakes, mister!"

The dude shoved his hand into his side coat pocket. Quick as lightnin' Jerry's left foot shot for'ard and the hard, high heel of his boot struck that pocket with crushin' force. The dude let out a yell of pain. With a terrific swing Jerry's right fist crashed in the dude's face and sent him sprawlin'. Miss Ruth screamed.

Then Jerry was on top of the sprawlin' bully. With one knee on his chest, he gripped the bully's right hand and twisted the gun from his clutch. He tossed the gun onto the desk, shoutin', "Here, Ruth—a souvenir for you." Then he jerked the bully up onto his feet and smashed him again, knockin' him clean over a row of desks. The bully just laid limp—he was plumb out.

And there was me standin' by the desk, watchin' the battle plumb dazed, and huggin' Jerry's guitar to my buzzom. Then I heard a moan, and Miss Ruth collapsed on the desk in a dead faint!

Jerry rushed over and gathered the little lady in his arms. So I set the guitar down and took charge of the tough customer sprawled on the floor. "Take that bad hombre and do anything you crave to do with him!" said Jerry.

I took Mr. Bardonni out and tied him onto my hoss with my lariat. There was a team and buckboard hitched at the school fence—the rig this hombre mentioned to Miss Ruth. But whilst I was ropin' up Mr. Bardonni, I heard a hullabaloo of bellerin' and snortin', and there come old Pandemonium, the crazy steer, down the road. He charged straight to'rds the team and buckboard, like a demon out of perdition. The team busted loose and went streakin' down the road to'rds Elko. So I jumped Jerry's bronc and took after Pandemonium. I roped the crazy critter with Jerry's lariat and tied him up to a tree. Then I got my hoss, with the tough dude tied onto him, and lit out for Elko.

When we got to town, I says, "Listen, stranger, you're goin' back to Denver tonight, only you're goin' alone." Then I took my rope off him and let him go. The last I seen of him he was hot-footin' it to'rds the depot.

When I got back to the Pardo schoolhouse, there was Jerry settin' on the teacher's desk claspin' Miss Woodstock to his breast. Her arms was twined round his neck and they was kissin' and cooin'.

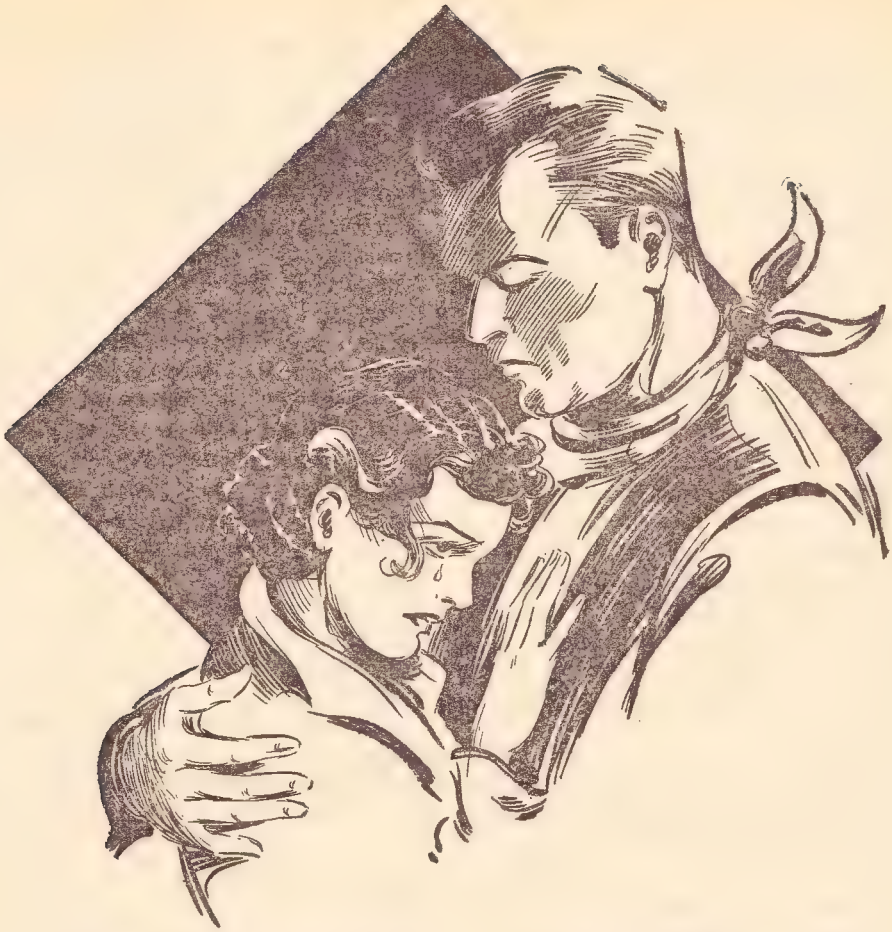
Waal—after Jerry seen his future wife home, I and him brung old Pandemonium back to the Arrondale ranch; it was plenty late. On the way, Jerry explained to me that the Bardonni party was a Denver pawnbroker, and also a bootlegger and gambler. The little lady pawned her pianna with him to git money to help her kid brother through college. Then he forced his intentions on her and was tryin' to make her marry him.

"But what's botherin' me," said Jerry, "is how I'm gonna break the news to Dad that Ruth is gonna be my bride!" I promised I'd help him, so when we put the steer in a corral, I went up to the house with him.

"Waal, boss," says I, "me and Jerry has got some very joyful tidings for you. Your son, here, has met up with his fate. He's rounded up a pretty little schoolma'am over Pardo way, and he's popped the question, and she's gonna take him for better or for worse."

"Say!" roared old Arrondale. "What I want to know is, have you galoots rounded up my Pandemonium yit?"

And when Jerry told him we had, "All right, then," he boomed, "I'll let you git married! You, too, Pete—if you want! Now, go git your supper!"



A Song on the Trail

By Elsa Barker

Just what are the qualifications for a sheriff's wife? Should a girl be strong and sturdy, or will a dainty little creature do—if she's the right sort and the sheriff likes her?

DOWN the steep, narrow mountain trail came a tiny figure on a tall, bay mare—the horse stepping along with the daintily arched steps of a thoroughbred—the rider singing, head thrown back, golden curls blowing in the breeze. The voice, like the singer, was small, and dainty, and sweet.

If Connie Morgan had a care in the world, she wasn't going to let it spoil the keen pleasure of her ride. She had already come five miles this morning, from the tiny log cabin where she had lived the last three summers with her father at the foot of the Truchas Peaks. Winters, they spent in a big white house in the little town of Palomas.

Connie was going in now to make arrangements for opening and cleaning the town place. In another two weeks, by the middle of October, they would have to be moving, before some early snowstorm might pile up its great, white drifts across their trail. Already, just the night before, they had had a warning flurry, and the ground was still white with it.

Connie's father had inherited money

and a hobby. He had a passion for beautiful horseflesh, as his father had had before him. Next to Connie, he loved more than anything else in the world his two dozen or so beautiful, slim-legged, and slender-bodied bays, blacks and sorrels. Racing stock they were, from some of the best stables in America. Occasionally he entered one of them in one of the local races at Palomas or Vegas, as a sort of defiant excuse to the world for owning them.

Every spring now for three years he had driven his frolicsome, spirited pets over the mountain passes to their high summer home, where they thrived on the luscious grass.

Another mile down the trail to the canyon bottom, and Connie would be at the cabin of Frenchy Arnot. Except for their own, there was no other cabin for miles in all this vast wilderness of high country.

She'd stop and see if there was anything Frenchy wanted her to do for him in Palomas. Poor, lonesome, fear-driven Frenchy! People had warned her about him. They said he was crazy and probably dangerous.

"It ain't noways natural for a body to shut hisself up thataway, away from ever'body, year in an' year out. Why, I even hear tell as how a feller stopped there and wanted to thaw hisself out by the fire one day, an' Frenchy chased him away with a gun. Like as not he'll get to broodin' up there some long winter an' kill somebody. Yes, sir, I'd keep away frum him if it wuz me," garrulous old Mrs. O'Brien, who ran the hotel, told her.

Connie had smiled at this and other warnings. She knew and understood Frenchy. They'd been good friends since that spring she'd found him pinned under a fallen tree, with a broken leg and some smashed ribs.

In the long idle hours while Frenchy's old bones were knitting, he'd told her a lot about himself, and what he hadn't told her she'd been able to guess.

It was an old story. Frenchy had been a chef—a good one—in a big hotel in the East. He'd had a son—a bad one, through and through—whom he'd loved as men do love an only son. The boy, Joe, had gotten into trouble with the police repeatedly, and old Frenchy had always managed somehow to get him out, hoping and half believing each time that this would be the last, that now the boy would settle down and behave himself.

Then Frenchy, tiring finally, decided that what the boy needed was a quiet place and plenty of time to think things over. The next time there was trouble Frenchy sat tight, neither putting up the money for bail for his boy, nor hiring him a good lawyer. What is more, when the case came to trial, old Frenchy appeared as a witness against Joe. The judge gave the boy five years at hard labor.

The state had a case without Frenchy's testimony, and the boy might have been convicted anyway, but young Joe never believed that. He blamed everything on his father.

After the verdict, Joe was given a few minutes to say farewell to Frenchy. He had looked at his father steadily for a minute, small black eyes glittering. Then, with demoniacal determination in his silky voice, he said quietly, "Remember this, old man! When my five years are up, I'm going to kill you!"

Unheeding Frenchy's quivering, gray-white face, he had turned and walked away with his guards, black head held high—a reckless, swaggering picture of unconcern.

It is a hard thing for a man to lose hope entirely. For a year after that Frenchy had tried to make peace with his boy, going to see him once a week, carrying delicacies of his own making to him. Young Joe Arnot's mother had died in an asylum, and he had always been a queer one. But now he had changed somehow from a wild, careless youth to a quiet, unbalanced man. He lived with but a single purpose—

to kill his father as soon as he was free.

Always he repeated in that soft, gentle voice of his, the threat he had made the day in the courtroom.

At last, despairing, beaten, old Frenchy had made his way West, hiding himself, year in and year out, in his little log cabin high in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, until now after ten years he was known as the queer old man of the mountains.

Yes, Connie thought she understood Frenchy Arnot. Small wonder he chased strangers away from his door with a gun! Instead of fearing him, she pitied him from the depths of her warm, generous heart. It was a terrible thing, she thought, to see a man loving, yet at the same time living in deadly fear of, an only son.

Another half mile down the canyon Connie drew rein and sat for a minute looking at the golden beauty of straight, trunked aspens, contrasted with white snow and an unbelievably blue sky. She loved this wild, mountain country of hers, loved every tree and every curve in the winding old cow and sheep trails, loved the tiny cabin nestling at the foot of the rugged Truchas Peaks.

Connie, at sixteen, fresh from boarding school in the East, had for the first time followed her father across the mountains with the ponies. She had slipped quickly and easily into a new life in the West. She was nineteen now, a tiny, perfect rosebud of a girl, barely tipping the scales at ninety-five pounds. With her sky-blue eyes, hair like autumn aspen leaves, and long, curling lashes, she looked like an old-fashioned Dresden china doll come to life.

Too much so for her own peace of mind! Kind-hearted, matronly ladies always insisted on mothering her; gave her overshoes; pestered her about wearing ear muffs and wool stockings.

Their concern was well intentioned, but it was just so much poison in Connie's cup of happiness. Cool, competent, self-sufficient little Connie hated looking like some fragile, delicate toy. She might have told them things that would have made their eyes open, but a girl couldn't go around boasting of things she had done, and besides, they probably wouldn't have believed her.

For instance, there was that spring she had found Frenchy pinned underneath the top half of a fallen spruce tree. She had, single-handed, managed to rig up a sort of block and tackle and lift the tree top enough to get the old man out. Then, too, there was the time she had found a grizzly milling around the horses, and her with only one shell in the rifle she was carrying. She hadn't hesitated. Her aim was good and her bullet went crashing through his brain.

Of course there was a particular reason why Connie didn't want to be just another big-eyed blonde with "it." That reason was young Buck Mindon, who was Sheriff Mindon now. Tall, straight as an Indian, face tanned nut-brown from years of riding the range, he had set Connie's heart to thumping the first time she saw him. She had had reason, during those first few months, to believe that he might feel the same way about her. But their acquaintance had ripened no further than an ordinary friendship. In her presence Buck Mindon seemed suddenly to become reserved.

Yet stubborn feminine instinct told Connie that he *did* or at least he *could,* care for her. There had been an unguarded moment at a dance last summer when she had looked up unexpectedly into his face, as she swirled by in another man's arms, her high heels clipping a gay tattoo on the rough, pine floor. Their eyes had met and clung for an instant; then they had lost each other again in the shuttling of the dance.

Connie was no fool. She thought she knew why Buck Mindon seemed to avoid her, and she was determined somehow to set things right again.

Buck Mindon was young. His salary as sheriff was small. His wife, should he take one, would have to do her own housework, would even probably be left alone for days at a time on the little ranch where he lived. The life of a sheriff's wife is not easy. Doubtless he thought its work and worry would crush Connie, make her prematurely old. With a queer, old-fashioned chivalry he would not ask a toy, who looked as if a gust of wind might blow her away, to cook and scrub and mend for him.

Connie gritted her teeth. All she wanted was a chance to prove, without telling him so in words, that in reality she was both competent and as tough as horsehide.

She rode on down the canyon, eyes pensive, but with a firm set to her soft round chin. In a few minutes she was in front of Frenchy Arnot's cabin.

The cabin, a one-room affair, was located about fifty yards to one side of the trail, and almost completely hidden behind great clumps of alder and willow. Smoke curled lazily out of the stone fireplace chimney.

With a start of surprise Connie noted a rangy, deep-chested gray mare browsing lazily on an oak bush a few yards away. The horse was a magnificent specimen of the mountainbred animal that can hold a long, swinging gait for hours over steep, rocky trails, and never tire. Connie was sure she had never seen her before. Her flanks were wet with sweat, and saddle marks still showed on her back; but she showed no other signs of fatigue. She was not tied, and she circled warily as the girl rode near.

Who could the visitor be? Certainly no passing cowboy—on a mare. Frenchy had no friends except Connie and her father. Was it possible that. . . .

Without quite knowing why, Connie felt a strange pang of apprehension. She slipped down from the saddle and walked to the door.

Nobody answered her gentle knock. She glanced at her watch. It was nearly noon. Frenchy would be coming in soon. He wouldn't mind if she went in and waited for him.

Quickly she opened the door. Inside all was cleanliness and order. A cheerful fire blazed merrily in the fireplace. Frenchy had not been gone long. A strange, wet, leather jacket hung over the back of a chair before the fire, and again that sharp stab of fear gripped her.

She warmed herself before the fire for a few minutes and then began a restless pacing of the room. There was a small window in the back, with a green shade drawn tightly down to shut out the blinding glare of sun on snow. Before this Connie paused.

Impatiently she flipped up the shade and peered out the window.

She froze in her tracks. One hand crept to her throat, and she gave a low, choked cry.

Two men stood directly back of the cabin, not more than thirty yards away. One of them was old Frenchy. He stood in an attitude of pleading, grizzled face quivering, shaking hands outstretched. The other towered over him, dark-bearded face laughing, gun in hand.

At their feet was a newly dug hole in the ground about six feet long by three feet wide.

Connie shivered.

In the instant she stood there paralyzed, a single shot rang out, and old Frenchy, a spot of red jumping suddenly out on his forehead, crumpled to the ground.

Connie grasped the window ledge for support. The room whirled dizzily around her. Dry-throated, she tried to scream and made no sound.

Horror was succeeded by a fury of anger. Old Frenchy had been her friend. She'd get his murderer. She'd show him he couldn't get away with that. Stumbling blindly, she started across the room to the door, sobbing under her breath.

Halfway there she stopped. She'd

just remembered something—something that made a difference. She didn't have a gun. Her father had taken her rifle that morning to hunt a bear that had killed one of his colts the night before. They had been without shells for his gun, a heavy, old-fashioned blunderbuss.

Connie gave a short, half hysterical laugh. She had a mental picture of herself—small, dainty, helpless-looking—defying a maniac murderer without even a gun to back her up. The man was vicious, partially crazy. The knowledge of a witness to his crime would make him desperate.

Her eyes darted quickly around. There was Frenchy's .30-30 hanging by the fireplace on the homemade, deer-foot gun rack. Hands trembling with haste, she levered the gun repeatedly to see if there were shells in the magazine. The gun was empty.

Frantically she searched the room, and found none. Obviously the murderer, having the upper hand, had taken all the shells.

She must get control of herself! Must think what to do! She did not dare get panicked! Dropping into the chair before the fireplace, she pressed slim, white fingers to throbbing temples. She knew she had a few minutes yet before the man outside should finish his gruesome task of covering the body.

There was nothing she could do now to help Frenchy, except to bring his murderer to justice. Connie was young, and it was the first time she had seen a man die; but one look at the dark red hole in his forehead had told her that he was beyond human aid.

She thought of trying to take the murderer in with Frenchy's empty gun. Reason told her that was foolish. She was so tiny and ineffective-looking, a desperate man would take a chance on her not having nerve enough to pull the trigger.

She couldn't clear out without the man behind the house knowing someone had been there. The snow had fixed that. Tracks would give her away even to a man unused to paying attention to such things.

Could she beat him to town? Dolly, her mount, was fast, but could she hold the pace for ten long, gruelling miles? Her mind contrasted the beautiful, slender-bodied Dolly with the rangy, thick-chested gray. Dolly wouldn't have a chance after the first few miles!

How about taking both horses? Connie peeped out the side window. At the extreme left, behind a clump of oaks, she saw a gray tail switch. She estimated the distance with her eye. The gray mare would be within the man's line of vision. So taking the gray was out!

Then suddenly the plan sprang to her mind—full grown, like Minerva from the head of Jupiter. It was so simple, so easy, that she smiled, yet it would require more courage than anything she had ever done before. She might not be able to do it, and the ruse itself might not work; but at least she could try.

Carefully her eyes searched the room. She had left no footprints by the little back window. She didn't dare pull the shade down again with the man so close. She'd have to take a chance on him not noticing that it had been touched. Quickly she laid the gun back on the rack.

Then quietly she slipped out the door and swung to the saddle.

With her heart in her mouth, she turned Dolly, easily, daintily, back onto the trail. Connie made no attempt to hurry her.

Certainly the murderer would see by her tracks that someone had been there. Almost certainly he would follow, lest a possible eye witness to his crime should escape to tell the authorities. What he would do when he caught up with her—well, if her plan should work as she hoped, there would be no need to worry about that.

A mile up the next slope on the trail toward town, the mare picked up her ears and whinnied. Connie's heart seemed to stop beating.

"Now," she told herself. "Do your stuff! He's coming!"

Icy terror gripped her. Her throat felt harsh and dry. Always before this, in time of trouble, she had needed to act quickly, without much time for thought or fear. Now she would know if she had the kind of courage needed to sustain her for long, dragging minutes—perhaps.

Connie tossed back her head and tried to sing the first few measures of *Cielito Lindo.* Her voice was a husky, whispering monotone. She swallowed the lump in her throat, wet her lips and tried again.

The result was bizarre and startling. Her voice, usually so sweet and true, was high now and almost shrill. Neither was she able always to hit the note she aimed at, but it was singing of a sort, at least.

She kept doggedly on until she finished the song. She untied from the saddle the little camp hatchet she always carried with her, and casually, carelessly, as she rode beneath an aspen tree, chopped off a limb that was hanging over the trail. A hundred yards farther on she chopped off another. Next, she paused to slash a great white blaze upon the trunk of a trailside fir.

So she rode, on up to the Hamilton Mesa, always aware of that lurking, stalking rider behind her, yet never daring to give sign of that awareness.

On top of the mesa she tried another song, still riding easily, hatchet swinging from limber right wrist. This time it was *The Red River Valley.* Her new effort was a little more successful. When she aimed at C she didn't often miss it any farther than B.

She thought of Buck Mindon and her voice quivered. If this man should shoot her from behind—now—maybe Buck would think she was the guileless little fool she looked, just a girl without sense enough to realize her own danger.

Now she was down the trail off the Hamilton Mesa to the Mora Pecos River, still singing intermittently, still nicking off limbs and blazing occasional trees.

At the Mora Pecos she stopped to eat her lunch and rest and water Dolly. Connie threw herself down by the creek, cowboy fashion, and tried to drink, but the water choked her.

"Now," she thought, "if he's going to do it, this is the time. I'm in the open, an easy shot."

For two long minutes she lay perfectly still, in the grip of the most utter and complete terror she had ever known. If she had just had a gun, could just do something that would put an end to this endless watching, waiting—waiting for she knew not what.

At last, trembling in every muscle, she arose, took her lunch out of the saddle bag and made a pretense of eating. As the expected shot still did not come, Connie grew a little more confident.

As she swung back into the saddle she played with the idea of making a break for it now.

"As soon as I get under cover of the green timber," she told herself, "I'm going to put my foot on the gas."

UP on the mesa trail a lean, dark-haired, bearded man watched her intently. Slowly his body relaxed and he drew a breath of something like relief. He looked down. At his horse's feet lay a freshly hewn-off limb of an aspen tree.

He glanced across the canyon again, to where a tiny rider on a tall bay mare was just going into the green timber. There was the flash of sun on steel as the rider's right arm swung up and down. From where he watched he could see a small sprig of something green fall to the ground.

A high, sweet voice singing a stanza of the incomparable *Cielito Lindo* came faintly to his ears.

A slow, triumphant smile spread over his swarthy features.

"Just some damn fool kid whackin' around," he said half aloud. "Queer voice. Glad I didn't make the mistake of riding up on her and letting her see me. There's not a chance that she saw it, or she'd 'a' made a run for it.

"I'd better get going. If I hurry back I can make it out of these damn hills by tomorrow night, and then take a train to California. Guess I'd better go back the other way and out by Santa Fe. Someone in that little town down there might remember later that I came through and start asking questions."

AN hour and a half later it was an excited, half sobbing girl who tumbled off a tall bay mare into the arms of Sheriff Mindon himself. She gasped out her story incoherently, between sobs and gulps.

Buck Mindon's arms tightened around her. "Just a minute now, Connie," he said gently. "Let me get this straight. What is it you saw?"

"I saw—I saw—a man kill Frenchy—Frenchy Arnot. You know—the old prospector who lives near us?"

"Murder, Connie? Or was it a—a fight?"

Connie shuddered. "It was just plain murder—in cold blood. Frenchy didn't even have a gun. He begged for his life, but the man just laughed. His name's Joe Arnot—Frenchy's son. I know, because Frenchy told me all about him—even showed me his picture."

"When did you see this killing—today?"

She nodded.

"Then how did you—" Buck Mindon glanced from Dolly to the tiny figure in his arms. He paled suddenly beneath his tan. "You witnessed a murder and the killer let you get away? Didn't he follow you? Did he try to hurt you, Connie?" Before she had time to answer he shook her, almost fiercely. "Tell me!" he said harshly. "Did he hurt you?"

She shook her golden head. "No. I—I don't think he knew I saw it. They were behind Frenchy's cabin. I saw them out the back window. I didn't even have a gun, Buck, and I couldn't think of anything else to do, so I just slipped out and came along as if nothing had happened. I even sang a little as I rode and whacked off limbs of trees.

"You see, I thought if I could act natural and unhurried enough that he'd believe I hadn't seen him. I guess I fooled him, too, because he didn't follow any farther than the Mora Pecos. I suppose he thought that because I was a woman that I'd have screamed and tried to run away if I'd seen the murder."

For a long minute Buck Mindon stood silent, a new light of comprehension mingling with the anxiety in his eyes. His hands shook a little as he dropped his arms and stepped back. He smiled down at her with lips that were still a little white and grim.

"I must be going now, Connie. I'll make it back to Frenchy's tonight and get on the trail. I ought to catch him early in the morning. Shall I take you over to Mrs. O'Brien first?"

She managed a tremulous little laugh.

"No. I'm all right now. I'm sorry I acted like a baby. You'll—you'll be careful, won't you, Buck? Don't take any chances with him, he's dangerous."

Buck Mindon looked at her gravely. "I won't be taking any chances—now!" he promised.

Connie watched him clatter down the street, and then turned wearily toward the hotel.

She spent a restless, sleepless night. "This must be what it's like to be a sheriff's wife," she told herself as the long minutes dragged by.

The next morning she was up early

and downstairs. Her face showed signs of what she had been through. Deep violet shadows circled her eyes, and her cheeks were drawn and colorless.

She kept watching the hands of her wrist watch. Time seemed endless. Buck should be back with his prisoner by ten or eleven. She wanted to go over to the sheriff's office and wait for them, but she was afraid.

Buck had had a night in which to think it over. Why had she weakened yesterday, lost her nerve and cried so when he put his arms around her? Suppose he had decided that, after all, she didn't have the stuff for a Westerner's wife? Connie didn't think she could stand it if he should look at her again in the old, cool, friendly way.

About eleven o'clock she saw him crossing the street toward the hotel, one arm in a sling. Somehow she knew by his stride that he had got his man.

In a panic she got up and crossed to a window, standing with her back to the room. She didn't turn until he had nearly reached her. Then what she read in his face set all her doubts forever at rest.

His eyes rested on her humbly, almost reverently, took in the trim perfection of her tiny figure, the lovely tilt of her small head, the blue eyes that looked at him so wistfully.

A strange, new beauty flamed in her face. Color returned in a flood to her pale cheeks.

"This must be what it's like to be a sheriff's wife," she thought, and smiled as Buck Mindon gently put his one good arm around her.

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La Golondrina

A Romantic Tale

By Lupe Loya

A Date with Cinderella

A Rip-Snorting Western Yarn

By L. Lindley Mulkey

Eight Spot

By Kingsley Moses

Ofttimes a cowboy needs brains as well as brawn, and in this yarn you'll find a situation in which good right arms and sixguns availed nothing. Would some keen hombre have the wits to solve the baffling situation?

ROLLICKING roars of revelry rolled out in salvos of sound as the roisterers in the Bodega whooped it up that evening. Open games of draw and stud, a faro bank, and a roulette wheel were doing a booming business. Loose gold and silver glittered on the green baize, and the lights were cheerfully reflected from polished mahogany and bright glassware.

"He's ridin' high, wide an' handsome," the tall young foreman of the Rail Fence said to Sally Everly. "When the old man gets started, there ain't no stoppin' him."

"It's his way!" the girl answered, shrugging her shoulders. In boots, overalls and faded flannel shirt she did not look like the daughter of the richest man in Cade County. But the roughness of her garb could not extinguish her beauty. The cropped, curly hair was red-gold, the nose piquantly tip-tilted; and the picture was completed by a full-lipped, generous mouth, and

eyes a corn-flower blue darkening to violet in moments of abstraction. There was a redeeming feminine inconsistency in her apparel too, in the silver chain of a locket at her bared throat.

"Yes, it's his way," she repeated as she smiled frankly. "Me, I'm schooled to it. If Daddy didn't buck and fight leather once in a while, I'd figure his health was failing."

True, Jack Williams considered. But there weren't so many girls who didn't feel bound to try and reform a man. Sally, here, was a wonder about that. When her father felt like a bust—well, he had one.

It was unusual for a girl even to enter Blue Bart's Bodega, the popular resort of this cowtown. But Sally Everly went where she pleased. If her father happened to be in the Bodega when she wanted to speak to him, in she went after him. Although when old Henry Everly "rolled his tail" she generally let him run, now, however, she stood poised in the doorway with her father's foreman and surveyed her rowdy sire appraisingly.

Mr. Everly, spending his money, held down the end of the bar. Blue Bart, the purple-jawed proprietor, was busily serving the cattle king and his dozen friends. Song was in the air.

"*An' the skies are not cloudy all day,*" chirped Willie the Wrangler.

"*An' the deer and the cantaloup play,*" chanted Judge Rumble. And began again in a booming basso: "*Home, home on the range. . . .*"

"That's what the tea kettle said," agreed Mr. Everly. "An' another li'l' drink won't do us any harm. Set 'em up in the other alley, Bart. A flock o' the same!"

"Comin' up, Mister Everly," grinned the proprietor, at the same time slanting a fishy eye at Sally, who had arrived at her father's elbow. Any other dame he would have chased out. Ladies and liquor don't mix so well, it was Blue Bart's solid conviction. But old Everly's daughter—well, let her own pa handle her.

"No, I'm not a-comin' home honey," the stockman took the defensive. "I ain't boiled, nor even simmerin'; jest havin' a time with the boys."

"Oh, that's all right with me," Sally humored the old reprobate. "Only listen, Dad—" and she whispered in his ear.

"Well, I reckon I can fend fer myself!"

"Maybe so; but give it to me." She was smiling, but there was plenty of resolution in her eye.

And from the watch pocket of his trousers Henry Everly reluctantly drew a tiny slip of paper.

Guardedly Sally examined this; there were scrawled numbers on it. Then she quickly snapped this scrap of paper into the locket on the end of her silver chain. "Check, Dad," she said, affectionately patting his shoulder. "I'm hitting out for home now, and in the morning I'll have a nice bromo-seltzer for your breakfast."

TOGETHER, under the stars, the girl and the Rail Fence foreman rode on homeward. They spoke little, but each one knew what the other was thinking.

Unlike a good many waddies, Jack Williams had no false assurance as to his own abilities. He was entirely fearless; he could handle men—and horses. He was gay, courageous, popular, very easy-going. But that was the trouble.

"If you'd only not be so nice—so—damned nice!" That's what Sally had said to him, exasperated, only this afternoon. She had learned that Jack had been up since dawn, combing the high pasture for a single, measly maverick—a hand's work, not a foreman's. "Everybody puts things off on you. How do you ever expect to run a spread of your own?"

"For who?" His knee touched hers, as they were riding in.

"You know, Jack."

"Aw, honey." He had grabbed her hand, and she had let him hold it a moment.

So now the ride back home was just another installment of this continued love story. It took a man, a hard, smart, sagacious man, to run an enormous ranch like the Rail Fence. Sally right well knew it and hoped that Jack was such a man.

Times were particularly hard just now. Beef was way down, and it looked as if there'd be mighty little profit for any of the cattlemen. Old Everly himself was, at the moment, just a little better than solvent. Four whole sections of his best grazing land were heavily mortgaged. And while he did have enough government bonds in his safe to clear up all indebtedness, there would—if it came to a pinch—be practically nothing left over for future operating expenses. The Everlys would pull through; the old man, for all his periodic toots, had backbone.

But after Henry Everly was gone—? That, in the starlight, was what occupied both riders. Silent, they rode hand in hand to the white bars of the gate. Mutely Jack dismounted to let Sally's sorrel mare through, then walked up the long lane to the house at her stirrup.

He took the sorrel there, as she slipped out of the saddle.

"I'll try to make good, Sally. I'll try to show yuh."

Sally had to smile. Her hand was on his sleeve. But she couldn't resist the dig: "Let the nighthawk put up the horses. It's his job."

"Well, he's way at the end of the feed lot. I could—"

"Oh, there you go again. Trying to do everybody's work," Sally exclaimed and there was disappointment in her tone.

"Aw, Sally, yuh don't hate me?"

Her hand slid up his sleeve and caught his chin firmly. "No, Jack." She kissed him on the lips. "I love you, darling dumbbell."

A RUMBLING sonata of snoring rolled out of the bunkhouse into that depth of darkness which precedes an autumn dawn. It was indeed a sound of surprising variety and volume—deep bass snores, thin falsetto snores, wheezes and whistles.

A couple of nervous milk cows in the neighboring corral stirred uneasily and switched their tails. A leggy foal in the feed lot leaped from sleep and rushed wildly about until its mamma kicked it gently and told it to hush up. "And those same cowpokes laugh when they hear a burro soundin' off!" was doubtless what the mare told its offspring.

Even the rather noisy homecoming of the boss, Henry Everly, did not disturb the boys' slumbers. Incidentally, unlike his foreman, the boss did not bother about the nighthawk's comfort; the wrangler had damn well better pick up his buckskin and stable it.

But just one minute later the roar which shook the prairie would almost have wakened the dead. It was as severe as the explosion of a cannon.

Jack Williams was out of his bunk while the earth still shivered and trembled. He did not pause even for his boots, though instinctively his fingers snatched up his gunbelt and sixguns, laid handy on the floor beside him. He was at the door of the bunkhouse almost before the others were stirring.

A wavering light in the ranch house suggested that the scene of the explosion might be yonder. In stocking feet the young foreman ran headlong towards the main building.

Then the light disappeared. There came the scuffing and stamping of horses, the low voices of men growling and swearing. "Slap in yore hooks an' git scarce!" someone shouted in the dark. "We'll have the whole nest of 'em swarmin'!" Indeed, back at the bunkhouse the boys of the Rail Fence were rallying to follow their foreman.

Jack let go one wild shot in the general direction of the ranch house. He couldn't see a thing, of course. But from beyond the house, where their horses had evidently been bunched, came a spattering volley in answer.

Bullets went zinging through the air or pecked into the dust.

It was Jack Williams' impulse to return that fire. But in a crisis he possessed a cool, calm intelligence; and he was aware that emptying his guns at an invisible target wouldn't be a whole lot of use. Moreover, such an act might leave him with empty cylinders in his long sixes when he came close enough to fight effectively. So, both guns ready, although silent, he dashed on in.

The racket of galloping hoofs showed that the enemy were fleeing. Still, in that blackness before dawn—the night was clouded now—you couldn't even glimpse the outline of the flying horses.

At the same time the clear command sounded in the deep voice of the one who was evidently the leader, "Hold yore fire! Don't give 'em a mark!"

Jack did fire once then, in the general direction from which the voice had issued. But he got no salvo for an answer this time. And, so far as he could know, his own shot had been useless. *Put-a-poom, put-a-poom* across the prairie, the thunder of the galloping horses faded further and further into the distance. The intruders, whoever they were, had got away clean.

Swiftly there came to Jack's mind the whole understanding of what had happened. Robbers had blown the safe in the ranch house living room. Anyone might have known that Everly kept negotiable bonds there. And the safe, hopelessly old-fashioned, could have been cracked by any yegg.

And Sally?

The girl's bedroom was in a wing, true. But what if she had been aroused before the explosion and had gone to investigate?

Her voice called him. Clothed in a dark green bathrobe, she held a match high at the living room door.

Beyond, amid the débris of shattered plaster, her father lay dead.

Up from the bunkhouse the rest of the Rail Fence boys were already pounding. They were in the living room by the time Jack had lighted the oil lamp.

No need to take old Everly's pulse or to listen to his heart. Sally, white-faced, wordless, needed only to look at her father's face. A bullet between the eyes is summary.

It was entirely evident that the old stockman, entering the living room, had come directly upon the thieves just as they were ready to blow the door of the safe. One of them must have drilled him ruthlessly, almost at the instant that the dynamite charge was fired. Everly's own sixgun, dropped on the floor, had not been fired; its bore was unsullied by powder, its chambers fully charged.

The girl, in the first shock of the catastrophe, seemed congealed. Her mouth was drawn to a thin, grim line; her eyes were the hard, brilliant blue of a bitter-cold winter sea. When her lover tried clumsily to offer a word of comfort, she held out one protesting hand and shook her head. Standing there with her back to the wall, hands gripped in front of her, she watched mutely while the men examined the evidences of the crime. It was as if, in her grief and anger, she was in a hypnotic trance.

The door of the ancient safe had been neatly blown and hung only by the shred of a hinge. That clearly indicated the work either of a professional peterman—a city criminal experienced in safe-cracking—or possibly of a skillful miner. These were not just stray badmen of the range, for the average grub-liner knows nothing of the use of high explosives.

"Professional crooks, if you ask me," Jack remarked, squatting in front of the blown safe.

"Dragged their picket ropes a long ways," commented Riley Jones. "There's none such varmints in Sump Flats. Not as we've heared of, huh, Noddy?"

Bing Noddy, Riley's partner, noted for the briefness of his replies, admitted: "None I've heared of."

"Well, they've come now," Jack expressed the obvious.

"An' gone," said Noddy.

"But not," Jack pointed with a finger, "with everything they were looking for." He was indicating the face of a flat drawer, the strong box, set into the center of the wide-open safe. That drawer, operated by a small dial combination lock, remained flush and unopened. "They either didn't know that the ole man cached his government bonds there," Jack continued, "or else couldn't get at 'em." He turned to Sally. "You have the combination?" For all the grisly situation there was the sense of the lift of relief within him. Sally's body was safe; her future financially provided for.

The girl nodded. Then she spoke for the first time, as she turned back towards her bedroom. "I'm dressing. We'll all be riding," was all she said.

Sally was the authority now. Silently the cowhands streamed out to catch up their broncos.

A milky line of dawn across the east heralded a sunless morning as they started out. Guns loose in their leathers, loaded cartridge belts sagging on their thighs, the Rail Fence men fanned out in a general northerly direction. There was the best cover, a gaunt wilderness country, mountainous and arid save for the winding flow of the stream known as Buffalo Run. This creek, cutting often through deep canyons, was impossible to follow continuously; but Jack Williams had the wise idea that the murderers would not stray too far from the stream's general course. They and their mounts would often need water, not the easiest thing to come by in this rugged country.

Sally and her foreman held the center of the fan-shaped formation. The others were lined out at about quarter-mile intervals. In that rugged terrain few were in sight of each other at any one time; but it had been agreed that a quick double shot should be the signal to rally.

The girl, on a pale gray mustang, a handy chunk called Ghost, rode recklessly. They were in a big loop of the river now, working downhill towards a deep cut. In the flat, cold light of the morning they could distinguish fresh hoofprints now and then, though the ground was mostly too stony to carry visible trace. But lower down, towards the edge of the stream, a distinct trail evidenced itself. The way was narrowly hemmed in by tumbled boulders; if the killers had planned a trap—

It was not a pistol shot which crashed against Jack Williams' head, but a jagged rock thrown deftly.

Sally, two rods ahead, heard the thump of the missile and reined back. She saw Jack sway in his saddle and smash against a bulging rock—not thrown, but balancing dizzily.

Ghost was yanked around, rearing. His forefeet struck and scraped on the rocks as he tried desperately to turn in that narrow compass. Sally, leaning far forward to preserve balance, had her revolver cramped between thigh and saddle horn. She could not jerk it loose, even though a man's figure rose on a stony shelf almost directly above her. So the noose of a lariat, dropped rather than thrown, clamped her elbows to her body and whipped her up out of the saddle. She felt her ribs crushed in as if caught in a chain tourniquet. Then pain blanked out her consciousness.

NAUSEATED and bruised, Sally woke to find herself helplessly baled up. She could move her body from the waist up, though the stabbing pain of bruised ribs tortured her if she stirred a muscle. Any other movement was effectively prevented, though, for her hands were securely lashed to her own belt buckle in front of her, and her overalled legs had the feel of being bound together tight at the knees.

From as much as she could perceive she was able to gather only that she must be somewhere at the back of a cave; the dim ruddiness of firelight

shone upon the damp vaulting of the roof above. There was from that general direction, too, the sound of the plashing flow of water. She must be in a hide-out in Buffalo Run.

Gritting her teeth against the pain it caused her, Sally writhed her body round till she could look in the direction of the outer cave, where there was the grumble of men's voices.

Four figures, faces masked to the eyes, sat around a lantern. They were intently playing black-jack, their prisoner saw, and it was no penny-ante game either. They were handling considerable sums of money, bank notes as well as small stacks of silver half dollars and quarters.

"Hit me!" came the low-voiced reiteration. Or else, "And again!" . . . "Enough!" . . . "Stand on this!" someone said.

"I'll pay eighteen." That would be the dealer.

"Sink that damned mutilated eight spot," another man snarled. "I'll be damned if I'll play with marked cards. Wonder he'd have to cut up the only deck o' cards we got! Jest like a sneakin'—"

"Shut yore damn fool face," was the sharp interruption, "else it'll be slapped shut for yuh!" That was the dealer. A quick glance over his shoulder had glimpsed the reflection of the lamplight in the supposedly unconscious captive's eyeballs. "So yo're awake, sister!"

The dealer laid down his deck of cards, rose and came over to where Sally crouched. He was a big, bulky man, his eyes startlingly pale through the slits in his mask. "Treated yuh sort o' rough, hey? Too bad, but we had to, kid. Yuh was getting a mite too close to home. No hard feelin's; we're just rough, big-hearted fellers."

"What—what happened to Jack Williams?" That was her immediate concern. "The man I was riding with."

"What's he to yuh—lover?"

"I love him. Yes."

"So . . . " mused the big man. "Well, now, if I tell yuh—"

There was a sharp interruption. "Aw, can the chatter an' tell her to come across with the combination to open the strong box." A stoop-shouldered man, with long arms which dangled ape-like, had risen and was holding the lamp high so that there was more light in the inner cave. He, like the others, was masked with black calico; not a makeshift scarf wound to the eyes, but a stitched, hand-made affair. To the girl's quick intelligence this was proof that these were not indeed mere casual criminals, but thieves of careful intent.

"Check. That's right," said the first man. "We got yuh here, sister. We aim to keep yuh awhile. Say until yuh tell the combination to that locked box in yore safe."

The locket against her flesh seemed suddenly hot. If they should guess what was in that! But she managed to control her voice to answer flatly, "I don't know."

"She's lyin' O' course she savvies," broke in a third member of the gang, masked uniformly with the others. "She led her ole man around by the nose, tough old wampus though he was. He'd sure have told her."

"We got ways of makin' yuh talk, sweetness," murmured the leader malevolently. "We wouldn't like to hurt a nice girl, but—"

Frightened as she was, Sally used her brain. It suddenly occurred to her that here was a way to find out the truth about Jack Williams. "I tell you I don't know." So much was the truth, for she had not memorized the numbers, for all that they were there plain to read, in the locket against her skin. But now the chance, by a misleading statement, to learn of her lover prompted her to say, "Jack Williams had the slip, with the numbers on it, in his shirt pocket."

The long-armed rogue exploded, "An' we let him get away, Cathcart!"

Too late a savage elbow jolted him

in the midriff. "We didn't search his corpse, yuh mean," corrected the leader.

But the correction came too late. If Jack Williams had been killed they would certainly have stripped him in search of cash and valuables, and most of all for a possible clue to the strong box's combination. No, Sally's lover was alive, free, and so would surely come looking for her, likely before dark fell again. Meantime—

For all her physical shrinking, the calm strength of her will allowed her to maintain a brave front. The four ruffians grumbled and growled, argued, hesitated; but in the end they did nothing. They could not be sure that she really did know the combination of the lock to the strong box. However lawless and brutal, they still had the Westerners' traditional loathing of any act of violence towards a woman.

The hours drew along while they half heartedly gambled with their tattered and mutilated playing cards. It was reasonable to suppose that with the return of night they would attempt an escape from a neighborhood which must by now be fairly swarming with vengeful searchers.

Then, sore as was her body and uncomfortable her position, Sally must have slept. For she woke to hear an entirely new voice—a very heavy bass, disguised, she was quite sure. So someone else had come to the cave to join her four captors! Not a friend, though.

"By midnight I'll meet yuh. I know the way." Those particular words were distinct. "Meanwhile get it off her an' bring it to me at—" The voice went trailing away as the speaker, unseen in the outer cave, moved off towards the den's opening.

Almost instantly, though, the man Cathcart, the one Sally had thought of as the leader, entered the inner cave, carrying a patent flash. This he coolly pocketed. And then, in the dark, without a word, seized the girl's chin in his left hand, jerked her head back savagely, and with a clawing right hand tore the locket from its chain.

Using his flash for an instant, he clicked the locket's lid open, to discover the scrawled scrap of paper. "Here all right," he called to the men.

A MAN with a fractured skull may have his lucid moments; but whatever his determination, no exercise of will can keep him straddling a horse for long. Jack Williams, with bloodied head, had been powerless to control his panicked bronc. But he had been borne away, clear out of the narrow cut and into open grazing land, before he finally toppled. There he was quickly discovered and carried back to the bunkhouse. Long hours he lay in a daze.

Sump Flats had turned out to a man to try to run down the murderers of the old Rail Fence owner. Henry Everly had been well liked. Moreover, the wounding of his foreman and the abduction of the girl had set the whole county seething with anger. Trigger-fingers itched, and a hundred riders went fanning out from the ranch, spurring into the hides of as many contrary cayuses.

Judge Rumble; the saloonkeeper, Blue Bart; Titus, the gentlemanly gambler; Sheriff Arp and Banker Burchell had all assembled to pursue the hunt. They stopped for a word with the injured foreman, who lay, conscious only now and then, under the ministrations of Doc Wren, the local physician, veterinarian and coroner.

Sheriff Arp, no modern sleuth, had been able to deduce little as to the identity of the criminals. Sump Flats had been enjoying—or suffering—a mild homestead boom, and many a saddlebum, moocher and tinhorn sashayed through the town. This dirty job would have been the work of strangers; but which ones?

Nor was the sheriff particularly adept in his pursuit of clues. Dozens of inquisitive amateur investigators

went rambling about through the ranch house, inspecting the shattered safe, viewing the spot where Everly fell, messing up whatever minute items of evidence there possibly might have been.

Till after dark the posses combed empty draws. But before nine o'clock in the evening the first enthusiasm of the pursuit bogged down. Most of the amateur hunters, hungry and weary, came trailing in on tired horses to the bunkhouse of the Rail Fence. The sheriff, for the tenth time, was trying to draw some definite details from the wounded and dizzied foreman, while the Judge, Blue Bart, Titus, and half a dozen others fidgeted around Jack's bunk.

The hands of the bunkhouse clock stood exactly at right angles to indicate nine o'clock when the distant fusillade opened.

Everyone but the old doctor was immediately out and off again. It was a welcome thrill for most of them after so many hours of futile casting about. But old Doc Wren, surgeon through Indian wars, sitting coroner in the wake of many a cowtown fracas, was content to stay at his post and watch his patient's temperature. A mean thing, a fractured skull; may not amount to anything, or may knock a man out as suddenly as a puff of breath snuffs out a candle.

Afar off sounded gunfire in a continual *tut-tut-tut-tut,* punctuated now and then by the flatter, distinctive note of a long rifle. It was a veritable cannonade. There could be little doubt that over the buttes and barrancas the boys were harrying the killer gang.

No moon, but a brilliant starlight, would give illumination enough for the battle, as Doc Wren perceived, staring out of the bunkhouse window. "But at that," he cynically observed, "thar'll be more of our own boys nicked than any of the others." Whereupon he moved over to the stove to sterilize some more knives and probes.

Jack, from the bed, spoke lucidly for the first time. "Good business for yuh tonight, Doc," he said. Then, remembering the situation, "Doc, Doc, where's Sally?"

The physician shook his head as he shot an appraising glance at his patient. The flush had seeped from Jack's face; he was, if anything, too pale now. The doctor left his scalpels to boil and went over to take Jack's pulse. "Slow, yeah—but steady."

"Sally? Sally? I remember—she was ridin' just ahead o' me when—"

"When somebody dropped a whole hunk o' hillside right crack on yore conk," agreed Wren inelegantly but accurately. "But don't yuh git all of a whew about Sally Everly. Men! Huh, she can handle 'em, like a good workin' hand handles a bunch o' dogies."

"But what happened to her? Is she out in that?"

Gunfire echoed now more brokenly; and what sporadic shots still detonated seemed actually to be approaching. Now and then, too, down wind, drifted the shrill *yip-e-e-e,* the cowboy shout of triumph. A distant, vague reverberation told that a cavalcade was returning.

"Sounds like they'd corralled the lot," mused Doc Wren. "That sheriff, fer all he's thicker than a stout cedar post, ain't one to drop his hand till he's played it to the limit. Sure enough, here they come. And," he stared through the window, "bringin' home the bacon."

"With Sally?"

"Tut, tut, is that nice?" the tough old codger jollied. "Dead hawgs make bacon," he supplemented cynically.

There was no necessity to explain this very gruesome jest. Several of the Sump Flats boys were riding double, with led horse which carried things which were not—well—riders.

One Rail Fence hand and one deputy sheriff had been sadly brought home to die; but the bodies of the four strangers which were carried in to be laid on the bunkhouse floor were far past Doc

Wren's ministrations. In the case of these four he could serve only as coroner.

The story of their capture and annihilation was briefly told. North of Buffalo Run, Riley Jones and Bing Noddy had spied, hailed and challenged them. In the running fight which had ensued, as reinforcements swept up, the four bandits had been mown down. But not a one of them had spoken before he died; there was yet no clue to Sally's fate.

With a rising fever, Jack Williams tried to sit up, demanding news of the girl he loved.

"I'll give yuh a shot of the needle," Doc Wren threatened. "I told yuh that girl could fend for herself."

Dizzily Jack heaved himself up from his bunk.

"Grab 'im. He'll kill himself!" one of the boys exclaimed.

"I'm goin'—goin'—to find her," Jack insisted.

"Hombre, yo're goin' to sleep," was the physician's reply.

Prompt in an emergency, Doc Wren drove his hypodermic needle hard into Jack's shoulder, while several cowhands held the man and forced him back onto the blankets. Quickly, because of his feeble condition, the narcotic took effect. He lay presently in merciful unconsciousness.

"We will now, gents," the doctor remarked, imperturbable as ever, "perceed to view the remains. You, Bart," he spoke to the saloonkeeper, "turn out their pockets. And you, Brother Titus, bein' a hand at figgers, make a list o' what yuh find on ary corpse, letterin' 'em A, B, C an' D."

Sheriff Arp, who had been back and forth to the ranch house restlessly, suddenly appeared in the door. "They *did* get those gov'ment bonds," was his sudden announcement.

Somebody, indeed, had purloined the bonds somehow. The drawer in the safe which served as strong box, and which had been locked tight at the discovery of the murder the night before, was now slightly open—and empty. It had not been jimmied or blown loose. Someone had got hold of the dial combination and placidly helped himself.

"One o' these fellers could've sneaked back, mebbe," Riley Jones suggested, pointing to the grim rank of corpses. "He might've got the combination—" he broke off to look nervously at the heavily slumbering foreman, then went on—"from—from Sally!"

"The rat!" cursed a dozen.

"Turn 'em inside out, Bart," croaked the sheriff. "One of 'em'll have the papers on him. He prob'ly thought he'd made a good haul."

Bing Noddy suggested, "Hard to cash where he's at."

Blue Bart and Titus rapidly went over the bodies.

There was a considerable sum of loose cash, several hundred dollars in bank notes and silver and gold pieces. But on none of the thieves was there any trace of a negotiable government bond. For the rest there was only the useless collection of junk which men are accustomed to carry in their pockets: knives, a rabbit's foot, a couple of horsehair fobs, various scraps of paper, tobacco sacks, sulphur matches, girls' pictures, a sentimental piece of poetry. Only a single postcard, taken from the body of the biggest bandit, offered anything which might be even remotely considered to promise any lead.

The postcard read, on the address side: "Mr. Chris Cathcart, Oklahoma City, Okla." The message on the other side was printed out; an ordinary enough message in any cattle country.

> Take it easy. There are no box cars ready for movement to El Paso now. Road not open yet. Get beef here before a week from next Saturday and there won't be no great hurry. Make deal by barter or trade of two for one.

Innocent looking as the card was, the sheriff and the rest stared at this thing till they were dizzy.

"Anybody might've sent it. An' it

might mean anythin', or nothin'," the baffled officer of the law said, shaking his head sadly. To run down a crowd of crooks and wipe them out, and then to discover that the master criminal had whisked away clean—a swell dish! "But if I kin only lay hands on any friend o' this here Cathcart's," Sheriff Arp went on, "any *live* friend, that is—"

"Jack? Where is he?" came a choked cry at the doorway.

Breathless, covered with dust, bare arms scarred and blistered from the rawhide which had bound her, and which she had had to burn loose in order to free herself, Sally Everly stumbled into the bunkhouse. Her eyes were blazing but beautiful, for all that they were deep-sunk behind cheek bones smeared with soot. And there was clotted blood on her throat where the chain of the locket had been wrenched asunder.

But, careless of all comment, she dropped on her knees by the semi-conscious sufferer, pillowing his head against her breast. "Jack! Jack dearest!"

"Don't take on, Miss Sally," the doctor told her. "He's jest enjoyin' sweet slumber. He'll come to in his own good time."

"Then we'll carry him up to the house," the girl ordered peremptorily. "Lift him, some of you boys."

Several jumped to obey her.

"Wal," Bing Noddy commented, as they carried the sleeping man out, "I aim to heir his bunk."

"Till he comes back," agreed Riley.

Bing Noddy made a good guess: "I 'low he ain't a-comin' back to the bunkhouse, hombre."

Removal to the ranch house had, however, roused Jack Williams from his pleasant torpor. For a minute or two it was idle blissfulness to rest his throbbing head against the shoulder of the girl he loved. Then dawning recognition of her own injuries startled him into full consciousness. "Honey," he gasped, "did they maul yuh?"

"Rest easy, darling," she told him, and proceeded quietly to recount the details of her capture—the interminable game of cards, the entrance of the fifth man, the violent theft of the locket, which obviously had led to the disappearance of her government bonds. "We'll be dirt-poor now, Jack. They'll foreclose on the whole Rail Fence. We'll have to begin all over, dear."

"In a cabin on Buffalo Run, with three hens and a burro," her lover grinned. "Well, that's all right with me. But they ain't outdrawn us yet. Let me think over what yuh told me."

Sally, for all her warm-hearted, emotional impetuousness, had a very clear head on her shapely shoulders. She had neglected no incident of her long day of imprisonment in the cave, including the detail of the peculiarly mutilated playing card. She had been able to identify the dead men accurately enough, from the brief glance she'd had of them in the bunkhouse. Sheriff Arp, accompanying her to the ranch house, had displayed the small scrap of evidence he had garnered, the ambiguous postcard. She told Jack about that, too.

"That eight spot—now that's curious!" Jack now reflected, going over her story in his mind. "Yuh don't know what suit it was? Guess it don't matter. All eight spots have their spots set on 'em alike. Ai-e-e-e!" He jerked himself upright, and thought his whole scalp was likely to burn off.

Tenderly Sally eased him back against the pillows. "Easy, cowboy! What is it?"

"Just an idea! Go ask Sheriff Arp to come up here," he muttered when he was able to control the throbbing of his head enough to permit himself to think lucidly. "Ask him on the quiet, honey, without the others knowin'."

"Hatched something, Jack?"

"Mebbe not; but got a hen on. An' tip him to bring that postcard he got off the guy that was called Cathcart."

No sooner had the girl gone out into

the darkness than the wounded man behaved like a very undisciplined invalid. Brutal as the pain in his head was, he slipped out of the bed, whisked out to the living room of the ranch, and there possessed himself of two articles—a deck of cards and the late Henry Everly's revolver.

Battling the blinding dizziness which seemed to club at his brain, he got back into his bed without being observed, tucked the revolver under the bedclothes by his hip and then performed a peculiar operation upon the first eight spot of cards which came to his hand—it happened to be an eight of clubs. He carefully poked out all the black spots, leaving a white oblong of pasteboard with eight symmetrically arranged punctures in it.

Sally came back with the sheriff.

"Honey," Jack told her, "us men'd now admire to stage a stag party. Would yuh be good an' kind enough to round up the Judge, Blue Bart, Titus, an' the Doc? Those four'll be sufficient. Send 'em in to me, an' wait awhile outside."

If Sally Everly resented this brusque taking over of her authority she did not, at least, evidence it. Or—just maybe—she reminded herself that she was no longer the boss here. With the loss of the bonds the Rail Fence was no longer hers; it would be corralled by the bankers. Gracefuly enough, therefore, she took orders from her foreman!

Silent, evidently uneasy, the four men who had thus been summoned came trooping into the ranch house bedroom.

Sheriff Arp stood just by the door, so that all four had to pass him and stand a little in front of him as they faced the man in the bed.

"I have here," said Jack Williams, producing the postcard the sheriff had loaned him, "a right interestin' document. We've all of us used stencils—Smack 'im, sheriff!"

The keeper of the Bodega, Blue Bart, had suddenly gone for his sixgun.

So swift had been the move that the slow-witted sheriff had not been prepared.

Only the very mercy of the extreme speed of Bart's draw, which made aiming difficult, sent the first bullet sogging into the wall over the bed's head-board.

Jack's gun spoke then and Blue Bart went down.

The neat packet of bonds was in the dead man's inner pocket.

THE room had been tidied up by the removal of the remains. The wounded man and his nurse were alone in the lamplight.

Sally was still eying that betraying postcard, with the punctured eight of clubs superimposed upon it. As in a stencil the eight damning words stood out through the soles in the playing card:

easy box
to
open here
Saturday
hurry bart

So that was the reason for the mutilated eight spot! It was a sort of secret decoding device which enabled the men to read the cryptic messages sent them by their chief.

The invalid, grinning, observed: "This'd sure make a funny-soundin' story, you doin' all the fightin', takin' all the risks, gettin' away from those rogues, and me just lyin' here dreamin'."

"And finding me the money!" Her fingers caressed his hot forehead.

"Sho', I had to find yuh yore money, sweet. But this yarn sure got saddled backward."

"What was the old song, dear?" she couldn't help teasing him tenderly. *"For men must work and women must weep!"*

"That poet sure pulled a boner. It went hind end to, this time."

Sally said: "Of course I do like to be called brave. But darling, *you are* smarter."

"No." His cheek touched hers. "It's only the result of a wicked an' wasteful youth, honey. I just know more about playin' cards."

The Valley of Dispute

By Eric Howard

They called him Rolling Stone, and certainly he had gathered no moss. But that was before he came to Clear Creek Valley and laid eyes on Anne, who charmed him with her radiant smile.

RIDING down from the pine meadows where he had camped last night, Jerry Stone suddenly pulled up his roan horse and stared down into the small green valley. A rough map that had been drawn for him told him that this was the disputed territory.

He reached into his saddle bag and took out a pair of high-powered field glasses. With them to aid his naturally far-sighted eyes, he could see the thin trickle of sparkling water that flowed through the center of the little valley. Its source was the spring that was the particular object of contention between the C Cross owner and the Circle Four outfit.

But it wasn't the valley itself, beautiful as it was, that had attracted his attention. He had seen the movement of animals down there, in and out of the aspens that fringed the green meadow. Cattle, no doubt!

Then he realized that they were horses, and that each horse bore a rider. He was too far away to make out their brands, but he judged that they were Circle Four riders. He frowned, remembering that the big outfit had agreed to keep the peace and to stay away from the disputed valley until he had completed his survey. That was the injunction of the court.

He rode on down the trail. Part of the time the valley was obscured by

trees and outcropping rocks. But whenever he could see it, Jerry swung his field glasses to his eyes and surveyed the scene. He saw about fifteen horsemen on one side of the thin stream. They seemed to be confronting someone lined up on the opposite side of the valley. But who it was Jerry could not see.

He rode faster, hoping to reach a place of vantage before his presence was discovered. A shot rang out, and he saw a puff of smoke from the gun held by one of the riders. An answering shot came from the other side and then many guns spoke.

Jerry spurred his horse, whirled off the dim trail and started down the steep slope. He came out on a level expanse, halfway down the hill, and halted again. The horsemen he had seen were riding away. Those who had answered their attack let them go.

He continued down into the valley. His field glasses were replaced, and his hand was near his holstered gun. In his saddle boot he carried a rifle.

"Stop, or I'll shoot!" came a sharp command.

Jerry had emerged from a thicket of aspens. In spite of his cautious advance, he had been seen. He stopped and slowly lifted his hands, meanwhile looking for the owner of the voice. A slim figure came out from the brush.

"Howdy," said Jerry easily. "I rode down when I heard all the shootin'. Looks like you run off all them hombres. I ain't one of 'em, if that's what you thought."

He observed that the hand which held a gun leveled at him, wavered. He saw, too, that the hand was quite small.

"Lordy, you're a girl!" he exclaimed and swung down from his saddle.

"Don't come near!" the girl cried. "Don't!"

Jerry obediently stood beside his horse, his hands raised again.

"Shucks, ma'am, you don't have to be afraid of me. I'm Jerry Stone, surveyor an' deputy sheriff, appointed by the court to run a survey through here an' find out who owns this spring an' valley. I reckon you must be Miss Custer of the C Cross, an' them fellers that jest left here was from the Circle Four. Right?"

The girl nodded and allowed her gun to fall at her side. Jerry grinned and lowered his hands.

"You're really Jerry Stone, appointed by the court?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am, I sure am."

"Buck Dawson—he's the Circle Four superintendent—said you'd never get here. He said he'd see that you were stopped and turned back."

"H'm! Well, it looks like Mr. Dawson kind o' miscalculated. Here I am."

Jerry's gray eyes twinkled, and a faint smile hovered on the lips of the girl. Then Jerry heard a groan of pain, and the girl turned swiftly and took two steps into the brush. Jerry followed. There on the ground lay a gray-haired man. His hat had fallen at his side and there was a dark stain of blood on his flannel shirt.

"Dad!" cried Anne Custer. "Here's Jerry Stone, the surveyor! He's come at last."

The old man on the ground gritted his teeth and looked up at Jerry.

"Them fellers attack you two?" Jerry asked. "Jest you two? Lord, I thought there was a whole army of you, from the way they was shootin'."

He knelt beside Jim Custer and opened his shirt, examining the wound.

"We been expectin' you," Custer said through tight lips. "We figgered they'd obey the court's injunction till you settled things. But they won't. I'm all right. Anne, girl, get my horse. We'll ride for home."

On that ride to the C Cross ranch house, with Anne on one side of her father and Jerry on the other, the young man heard their version of the boundary dispute. The spring and half of the green valley had always been considered a part of the C Cross spread until the Circle Four Ranch

was bought by a syndicate and Buck Dawson placed in charge of it.

Dawson, with big plans for the development of the ranch, had soon claimed the whole valley and all the water of the spring. Jim Custer had taken the dispute into court, with the result a survey had been ordered made, and both parties had been enjoined to avoid conflict.

Dawson, however, had failed to live up to his agreement. One of Custer's riders had seen a suspicious fire down in the valley, and upon investigating had found two C Cross calves bearing the Circle Four brand.

"It's easy to change C Cross into Circle Four," Anne pointed out, "and that's what he's been doing. Dad and I rode out this morning, and we met those men there. Dawson was with them. Dad reminded them that the court had ordered them to stay away from the stream. Dawson laughed and some pretty hot words followed. Then one of them began shooting."

"I saw that," Jerry nodded, "but I wasn't close enough to see any of 'em. This Dawson must be pretty bad, huh?"

"Scum!" ejaculated Jim Custer. "Scum, that's what he is! He'll stop at nothin' to get what he wants. He's told us what he'll do to you. We thought mebbe you'd been scared out already."

"Not yet," Jerry grinned whimsically. "I haven't seen Dawson yet, of course, so I'm not scared out. You can't tell—I may be when I meet up with him."

"He's scared out plenty," grunted Custer.

But Anne was looking steadily at Jerry, as though testing his quality and strength. She saw a mouth and chin, firm and resolute, in spite of his slow smile; and she recognized that beneath his easy good humor there was something of steel or of stone.

"I guess he won't scare you out," she nodded, satisfied.

At the ranch, after Jim Custer had been made comfortable and a rider had been dispatched to Cabazon for a doctor, Jerry Stone sat on the porch steps and watched the slim, quick-moving figure of Anne as she went about directing the work of the men. He admired her competence almost as much as he admired that direct, level glance out of her blue eyes and the rose flush on her tanned cheeks.

She came and sat down beside him, as he had hoped she would.

"This feller Dawson," said Jerry, voicing the thoughts that had been running through his mind; "it seems like he was takin' a long chance, attackin' you."

"He didn't know I was there at first," Anne told him. "He thought he'd got Dad alone. When he saw me, he was surprised; he doesn't want any witnesses to what he does. And then I think he saw you riding down, and that's what made them leave. Maybe he didn't know who you were, but you came just in time."

"Glad of that," Jerry nodded, "although I wouldn't 'a' been much use against that mob. I'll start out in the mornin' an' look the situation over. Then the next day mebbe your father will lend me one of his hands an' I can get to work."

"Dawson will try to make trouble for you, one way or another."

"I reckon he might. But I been appointed to run a line through that valley, an' I guess I have to do it."

There was something very pleasant about the C Cross outfit to Jerry Stone, homeless wanderer of the range. Sitting at the table with Anne, and later, before the great fireplace in the living room, he began to reflect upon the wisdom of settling down. They had called him Rolling Stone, down on the Border; and he had certainly gathered no moss. Of experience he had had a plenty. He had known danger, and he had followed the bright trail of adventure. That was what he was doing now, he thought, stroking his chin.

None of the regular deputies had wanted this job. He remembered that they had all protested that they weren't surveyors. The sheriff had seized upon Jerry and had eagerly appointed him to carry out the court's order. He grinned to himself; the sheriff had known what he was sending him into, and he hadn't given him so much as a hint of Dawson's caliber. But he was glad he had come.

The doctor from Cabazon arrived, interrupting the friendly conversation Jerry and Anne were having. And with the doctor came a young man who was introduced as Stanley Vail. Jerry took an immediate dislike to him, for no other reason than the cordiality with which Anne welcomed him. Stan Vail was a laughing, happy, curly-haired cowboy. He had a way with him, as he caught Anne's hands and held them, looking down at her affectionately.

"I heard your dad had been shot," he said, "so I rode right out with the doctor."

"Thanks, Stan."

"How is he, honey?"

Anne didn't try to take her hands out of his, and she didn't object to the word of endearment. Jerry Stone, busying himself with the rolling of a cigarette, felt the blood rise in his cheeks. He rebuked himself sternly and caustically. Just because Anne had been pleasant and friendly to him, a stranger, didn't mean that he had any right to object to her friendliness toward others. No doubt she loved this big, good-looking Stan Vail. Was that any business of his, Jerry Stone's? It wasn't, but for all that, he felt a vague resentment.

When Anne had followed the doctor into her father's room, Vail sat down before the fire and spread his hands to the blaze.

"So you're goin' to survey Clear Creek Valley?" he asked.

Jerry had dealt with men of all types in his wanderings. He had learned to weigh not only their words, but their manner of speech, and so he caught an overtone of mockery, of derision, in Stan Vail's question.

"That's what I was sent here for," he answered obliquely, "an' it looked easy enough. They didn't tell me about Dawson."

That was a bid for Vail to express his opinion. He merely laughed.

"Didn't they tell you what Dawson did to another surveyor that came here?" asked Vail, after a moment.

Jerry shook his head and Vail laughed again.

Jerry wondered why Vail, friendly to the Custers, probably in love with Anne, had not allied himself with them in their fight with Dawson. He himself had already taken their side, had decided that they were in the right. Otherwise, Dawson wouldn't have attacked them, fifteen men against a man and a girl.

"Dawson's a big man over this way," Vail volunteered. "The county seat an' the sheriff are too far away to bother him. He does what he likes."

"Yeah? But in this boundary dispute, how come he's been allowed to do what he likes? One of his men shot Jim Custer today. How come the men of this section stand for that?"

Vail shrugged. "Nobody big enough to buck him," he said with an appraising glance at Jerry. "The S Bar O—that's where I work—has kept him off our range so far. But the boss ain't lookin' for trouble."

"So you jest let him shoot up anybody he don't like?" asked Jerry mildly. "You let him try to kill Jim Custer an' mebbe injure Miss Anne?"

"Me?" demanded Vail angrily. "I—" Then he smiled again. "I reckon you won't do anything, once Dawson gets to you."

"Mebbe," Jerry granted.

When Anne and the doctor came out of Custer's room, reporting that he was resting easily and not badly hurt, Jerry got up and said good night. He went to the room Anne had shown him earlier, and lay awake for

hours, pondering on the situation. Vail, he was sure, had tried to impress him with the impossibility of carrying out his task. There was nobody big enough to buck Dawson! Jerry grunted in disgust. He would suspend judgment until he had met Dawson, but from what he knew of him, he was an imitation badman running loose on the range.

Tomorrow he'd make a preliminary inspection of the spring and the valley. Perhaps he'd meet Dawson.

Hours after he had gone to his room, long after the doctor had left, Jerry saw Stan Vail ride away. He scowled.

EARLY the next morning, after a hasty breakfast in the kitchen, Jerry saddled his roan and rode off toward Clear Creek Valley. After reaching the spring, high above the valley, he followed the stream down to the point where its waters poured into a blue lake, which was indisputably on C Cross land. Dawson, in claiming the spring and the valley, intended to impound the water by building an earth dam and creating an artificial lake, from which he could irrigate the Circle Four bottom lands.

There was much at stake. Nothing was so valuable as water on this range and the possession of the spring meant everything to the C Cross. The Circle Four, a bigger spread, had plenty of water on other parts of its land.

As Jerry had half expected, a rider approached him from the Circle Four side of the valley. Pretending that he had not seen him, Jerry rode on slowly.

"Hey, you! What you doin' here?"

Jerry halted and turned, waiting for the other to ride close. As the man advanced, he was sure that it was Dawson. And as he looked at the man's heavy, pockmarked face, a flicker of surprise passed over his own. Dawson was wearing the usual range garb, but as Jerry looked at him he saw him in different clothes.

He saw him mounted on a chestnut Arabian, with a silver-studded saddle and ornamented bridle, wearing tight Mexican trousers, a silk shirt and a short jacket, with his oily black hair topped by a flat-crowned sombrero. He saw him riding into the Border town of Los Alamos, at the head of a band of men. Again he listened to the warning cries of the people as they took refuge behind the barred doors of their houses. He heard again the name which struck terror into their hearts. The name was not Dawson.

"What you doin' here?" the rider demanded again.

Jerry smiled. The advantage was his, decidedly. He knew Dawson, yet Dawson had never seen him before.

"I reckon it's none of your business," Jerry drawled, "but I don't mind tellin' you."

He explained who he was, watching Dawson closely. What would have been an ingratiating smile in another man crossed Dawson's face and he thrust out his hand with an exclamation of pleasure.

"Been expectin' you," he boomed. "We sure want this dispute cleared up. Why didn't you come right along to the Circle Four? We can make you comfortable an' help you while you're on this job."

"Thanks," nodded Jerry. "I met up with Custer an' his daughter, an' I'm stoppin' there."

"Huh!" laughed Dawson. "Well, we ain't got any pretty girls like her over our way. Don't blame you." He leered at Jerry and laughed again. "But we'll be glad to help you out. Jest come along an' let me show you where this line oughta be, the way we see it."

Jerry followed him, and listened to his explanations. They didn't ring true, but he made no comment. He was waiting for some definite proposal from Dawson. It came later as a result of something Jerry said.

Dawson had asked if he were a regular deputy, and he replied that he had taken the job because he was broke.

"Say," Dawson caught him up, "you won't get much out of this—jest wages. No use wastin' a lot o' time on it. Custer's had the use of this water quite a spell, but it's Circle Four property, all right. That's plain enough." He waited a moment, then hurried on. "S'pose you make a quick job of it, an' go back an' report the line runs here!" He gestured with a sweep of his arm. "Huh? I could make it worth five hundred, mebbe."

Jerry laughed. "You tryin' to bribe me, Dawson? No," he shook his head, "I was taught always to do my duty. I got to run a survey through here, all right an' proper."

"Shucks!" said Dawson, with that same ingratiating smile. "Of course you do! I was jest jokin'. Forget it! These days, most men can be bought—I was tryin' you out. Now I can see you're square, an' goin' to do what's right. I reckon you won't let Anne Custer's smiles bribe you, huh?"

"I'm here to do this job," said Jerry sternly. "They tell me another surveyor was here. Did you bribe him—or what?"

"Lordy, no!" boomed Dawson. "That feller was scared of his shadow. Somebody filled him full o' hot air, told him I was plumb ornery, an' he jest quit. I'm glad to see you on the job, 'cause we want this matter settled."

Shortly afterwards Dawson left him with another handshake and hearty words. Jerry watched him, smiling slightly. He had deliberately avoided all mention of the scene he had witnessed the day before; he had allowed Dawson to think he was taken in by his overly cordial manner. But he knew that, failing to bribe him, suspicious of him because he was staying at the C Cross, and evidently not wishing to try to scare him off, Dawson would resort to other methods when the time came.

Late that day he rode back to the C Cross and went in to see Jim Custer. The old rancher was sitting up, staring somberly out of the window when Jerry entered. He turned with a smile and gestured to another chair.

They discussed the boundary line for some time, but Jerry made no mention of Dawson's attempt to bribe him. As he got up to leave the room, Jim Custer put out his hand.

"I took a likin' to you, young feller," he said, "an' I want to tell you something. You seem like an easy-goin', square-shootin' man. The sheriff run you in on this job prob'ly without tellin' you what you'd be up against. I'll tell you. Dawson's bound an' set to beat me, legal or illegal. I figger we can't win, even if the court says we're right. I wouldn't care so much, only this outfit's all I've got—for Anne.

"If you report that we're right, Dawson won't let you out o' here. He'll get you. What the sheriff oughta do is to send a lot of men here on this job, not one. One man hasn't got a chance. I'm tellin' you this 'cause I don't want to see you get hurt. You'd better go back an' tell the sheriff you can't do it alone."

"An' then he'll send somebody that can do it—the way Dawson wants it done, huh?"

Jim Custer nodded. "I reckon."

Jerry shook his head. "I'll stay till it's done. I met up with Dawson today. Seems right friendly. I won't have any trouble, I guess. If I can borrow one of your boys tomorrow, I'll start in."

"Don't let Dawson fool you, son. If he finds out you're square, if he knows you're goin' to report in our favor—the way you'll have to, bein' square—he won't let you make that report."

"Thanks for tellin' me. But I'll have to risk it, I guess."

Meeting Anne in the hall as he left the room, Jerry was puzzled by her impersonal, unfriendly nod. She passed

him quickly, going into her father's room, and closed the door. Jerry stared. The friendliness of the day before had vanished.

As he went out on the porch Jerry saw Stan Vail riding down the lane toward the road to Cabazon. He nodded to himself. Vail had been talking to Anne about him. He lounged against a porch pillar, staring across at the rolling hills. When this job was done and he had made his report, he'd be riding again into new country. No use staying in one place. But he wouldn't have minded staying at the C Cross.

Presently Anne called to him, saying, "Dad would like to see you a moment."

When he went back into the room, the rancher scrutinized him for a long moment. Then he spoke. His friendly, paternal attitude of a few minutes before seemed to have vanished, too.

"I believe in sayin' what's on my mind. We been told, Stone, that Dawson is boastin' he's bought you up. When I advised you to leave this job undone, my warnin' didn't seem to worry you. Now Dawson claims he's bribed you. Did you meet him today?"

"Yeah."

"Did he bribe you?" Custer leaned forward.

Jerry looked from him to the girl.

"I reckon you'll have to find that out from the messenger boy that brought you this here news," he drawled. "If Dawson did bribe me, I wouldn't be tellin'. If he didn't, an' says he did, it wouldn't do me much good to talk. I'll leave the talkin' to him an' Mister Vail."

He turned toward the door.

"I wouldn't 'a' listened to it," said Jim Custer, half apologetically, "if you hadn't acted so plumb careless about buckin' Dawson."

Jerry grinned.

"Dawson's a kind of bogey man around here," he remarked. "Vail was tellin' me how bad he is, an' you, too. Looks like nobody wants me to survey that valley. How do I know but what Dawson's bribed Vail?"

"We've known Stan Vail, a long time," said Jim Custer.

"An' you don't know me at all," Jerry smiled. "Well, all I'm askin' of you is the help of one man."

He left them, passing Anne with an amused glance; and he knew that they would discuss him after he had gone. Later, at the table and in the big living room, they were hospitable enough, but the friendly warmth of the day before had disappeared. They weren't sure of him, didn't trust him. Well, it couldn't be helped. He went to his room early, after Custer had told him that Slim Purdue would help him the next day. Purdue was one of the oldest men on the ranch, and unquestionably loyal to Custer.

JERRY and Slim left the ranch early and had been at work for several hours when Slim came running down to where Jerry stood.

"They're comin'!" he cried. "Dawson an' some of his gang! We better duck out o' here."

"Let 'em come," said Jerry.

Slim stared at him, open-mouthed. "Say!" he exclaimed. "When Dawson sees where you're runnin' this line, he'll go loco. I don't aim to get shot up."

"Then jump your horse an' high-tail it for the ranch," advised Jerry.

"Heck, I can't leave you here!" muttered Slim. "The boss'd give me hell if I did. Come on!"

Jerry waved his hand and went back to his instrument.

"Say!" exploded Slim. "You don't know this Dawson!"

Jerry grinned. "That's where you're wrong, Slim. I sure do know him."

Not knowing what to make of that, Slim stared at Jerry. He scratched his chin, meanwhile glancing up toward the bluff where he had seen Dawson and his riders.

"You're runnin' this line jest where Jim Custer claims it oughta be," he

muttered, "which means Dawson'll be out for your scalp. If he bought you off, how come you ain't doin' what he wanted done?"

Slim was asking the question of himself, having been told by Jim Custer to keep a close watch on Jerry If the surveyor-deputy heard it, he gave no sign. He was busily at work when Dawson, followed by three men, rode into the valley.

As before, Dawson greeted him cordially, but Jerry saw that his companions were hard-faced, scowling and heavily armed. In reply to Dawson's questions, he indicated where the boundary line would run. Dawson uttered an exclamation of surprise and asked more questions. Jerry replied crisply.

"So you're sidin' with Custer?" Dawson demanded, his ingratiating manner suddenly leaving him. "Him an' his gal fixed you, huh?"

He took a step toward Jerry, his right hand stiff above his gun. Out of the corner of his eye Jerry saw his three companions circle in. Somewhere behind him, if he hadn't fled, was Slim.

When Jerry Stone replied to Dawson, he looked him in the eye. He was smiling.

"I'm runnin' the line where it belongs. It ain't a question of sidin' with anybody. Custer jest happens to be right. You tried to bribe me, he didn't. But that's beside the point. Here's the line, and here she goes!" He lowered his voice, and added, so that only Dawson could hear: *"Sí, Señor Gringo Dawes!"*

If Dawson had intended to draw his gun, those few softly spoken words astonished and surprised him. It required a full moment for them to sink into his mind, and in that moment he saw a flashing series of pictures from his own past.

Jerry, before, had seen those pictures. Gringo Dawes, the terror of Border towns, riding his chestnut Arabian, robbing and killing at the head of his band of assorted ruffians. Gringo Dawes, in fights with sheriffs and rangers, riding rough-shod over the officers of the law. And then—what Jerry didn't know—Gringo Dawes captured, arrested, wounded, jailed, escaping only by chance and the loyalty of one of his men. Now as Buck Dawson, he was the boss of the Circle Four, but unable to run straight, playing his old game of taking what he wanted by force.

Jerry's words brought to him the realization that he was known. Jerry, like the others he had fought and killed, was an officer of the law. Expressions of fear, anger and cunning crossed his heavy, dark face. His stiff-fingered hand moved downward.

But Jerry, watching him closely, stepped quickly forward, his gun flashing in his hand, the barrel of it sinking into Dawson's paunch. With his left hand he snatched Dawson's gun from its holster, flung it aside as the other's hand closed on his wrist.

Over Dawson's shoulder Jerry saw the three Circle Four men dismounting, edging forward.

"Stay where you are," he commanded, "or I'll finish Dawson. You're wanted, Gringo. I'm arrestin' you."

They stood quite still, Dawson clutching Jerry's wrist, Jerry's gun against his body. The other men had halted. Where Slim was Jerry didn't know.

"Circle round!" Dawson called to his men. "Get in back of him an' grab him!"

"You do," laughed Jerry, "an' I'll kill this hombre. The reward notices say 'Dead or Alive,' Gringo—you oughta know that."

Dawson did not lack courage. With a savage growl of rage, he jerked at Jerry's arm, exerting the full strength of his heavy body, and swung aside, his left arm sweeping down to knock the gun from Jerry's hand. The gun roared and the bullet grazed Dawson's side as he swung. As Jerry was off balance and a little apart from Daw-

son, one of the Circle Four men fired. Hot lead tore through Jerry's shoulder. In self-protection he closed with Dawson, attacking savagely, bearing him to the ground. Dawson yelled to his comrades and they ran toward the fighting men.

Jerry heard the roar of sixguns and then, with a feeling of relief, Slim Purdue's steady voice.

"Stand back, you jaspers!" said Slim.

Amid the deafening roar, as he fought with Dawson, Jerry heard the crack of a rifle. Then he saw that Dawson had recovered his own gun and was bringing it down toward his head. He swung aside, wrenching his wounded shoulder, and with a pain-stiffened finger pulled the trigger of his forty-four. Dawson's gun crashed against his skull and a great weight descended upon him.

That was all Jerry knew until he felt gentle arms encircling his neck and felt hot tears upon his cheek. Then he heard Slim Purdue's voice.

"I reckon he's comin' to. He sure finished Dawson or Dawes, or whatever his name was. An' them others—say, when you opened up with the rifle, they must 'a' thought a hull army had dropped down on 'em! Only you shouldn't 'a' come here, ma'am—it was plumb crazy!"

Jerry heard a choked sob and softly spoken words.

"I came to spy on him, thinking he had sold out to Dawson; I didn't trust him. I might have known—I did know that he was honest and square, but I let Stan Vail—"

"Vail!" said Slim disgustedly. "You can't believe him on a stack of Bibles!"

Jerry wanted to tell Anne not to cry, but it was some time before his brain cleared and he could sit up. He found Anne beside him and he patted her arm.

She said something about forgiveness and he smiled at her. He saw her own radiant smile, and he sighed. Her tear-wet cheek was against his and she kissed him.

"Heck!" observed Slim. "We oughta be ridin' home."

Slim rode on ahead and reported to Jim Custer the details of what had happened.

"Yeah," he concluded, "an' you're goin' to get a son-in-law out of this deal."

"Not Stan Vail?"

Slim waved his hand disdainfully. "Him? Lord, no! This surveyor-deputy! They plumb forgot I was with 'em, billin' an' cooin' like they'd discovered a new world."

And they had.

Phantom Gunman

By John Johnson

There was only one person who could bring law to Sterling County, and they said he was dead. Yet someone, some strange, illusive gunman, entered the ranks of justice to wreak vengeance for the death of an honest man.

"ANY mail for me?" asked the girl.

"Nothin', Miss Lee."

"You're sure there's nothing from Jim Cranford?"

The corrupt postmaster of Sterling could not meet Grace Lee's wide violet eyes. "Nothin', ma'am," he lied.

She sighed and went away, a shadow over her fine-featured, lovely face. The postmaster stuck a postcard in his pocket and hurried over to the Diamond Saloon.

Three men were playing cards at a table. Sterling knew and feared them as the Big Three. The postmaster handed the postcard to Crease Walden, who read,

Dear Grace,
Home next week.
Love,
Jim.

"Jim Cranford's comin' back," said Crease.

At this announcement Capper Munn and Sheriff Sid Lucas started. "Jim Cranford!" they echoed. The three stared at each other, their set faces reflecting the memories roused by that name.

Jim Cranford had first won fame as a super-gunman in the Sterling County range war, two years before, when the cattlemen rose to fight the rustlers who had so long oppressed them. Jim was only twenty-two then, and had never shot at anything but tin cans. But when the struggle broke he turned his guns from tin cans to men. He beat several professional killers to the draw and led the cowmen to victory in a dozen skirmishes. Elected sheriff despite his youth, he gathered a posse of daredevils and rode up and down the county till the last rustler had been killed, jailed or driven out.

When Sterling County was at peace again, Jim's job was done. He resigned his office and took the south trail to Sonora with a herd from his father's ranch. After delivering the cattle he drifted on alone through Mexico. A revolution suddenly flared up there, and Jim seemed to drop out of sight, months passing with no word from him.

Meanwhile changes were taking place back home. Crease Walden, a crooked rancher, got out of jail by political wire-pulling, returned to Sterling and had a talk with the new sheriff at the Diamond Saloon. Sheriff Lucas had been one of Cranford's deputies, but now he sold out his oath of office and joined Walden's plot.

Capper Munn, boss rustler, who had fled from Cranford's posse, returned when Walden and Lucas sent word to him. A swarm of gunmen accompanied him. So the old days were back in Sterling County—open rustling, killing, lawlessness. Old George Cranford, Jim's father, had tried to organize resistance. As a result he was shot from ambush one night, his lands and cattle taken over by the Big Three.

The small ranchers, disorganized and helpless, lacked leadership to restore peace and law. They had one hope: "If only Jim Cranford comes back!"

Crease Walden broke the silence. "Don't let a word of this get out." He commanded, tearing the postcard to bits. "Turn out the gang to guard all trails and roads south of Sterling, to watch for Cranford."

"That's it—we've got to get Cranford!" said Capper. "He's the one man that can beat us, and he musn't get away. Shoot him on sight and pour lead into him till he stops kickin'. As long as he lives he's dangerous!"

Massive, bull-like Lucas shook his head. "I worked for that hombre once, but I'll fix his clock. I'll watch the main trail myself!"

A TALL, lean rider came up the southeast trail at dusk. He had a striking face, a face of contradictions—a friendly mouth above a stern chin, full round cheeks like a boy, a curved, hawk-like nose, and keen, bold dark eyes. As he passed a nester's cabin at the county line the old nester cried, "Jim Cranford!"

Jim stopped to shake hands. "See yuh later! I'm in a hurry to see Grace and Dad," he said in his deep, mellow voice.

"Then yuh ain't heard, Jim?" asked the nester. "Didn't yuh get any of our letters?"

"Why, no. Anyway, there wouldn't be any news to hear, with everything okay here. I got caught in that revolution, saw lots of fightin' and hard ridin' with the *Federalistas;* and my mail never caught up with me." Jim sighed. "Been gone seven months, Breeze. I've seen lots of things, and had a great time, but it's best of all to get home again. Well, so long!" he said and started away.

The nester grasped Jim's arm, saying hoarsely, "Wait!"

Jim saw the sorrow in the old man's eyes. "There ain't anything wrong, is there?" A chill went through him. "What is it? Pronto—tell me!"

The nester told him. At the news of his father's murder Jim seemed stunned for a moment; then he went nearly mad with grief and rage, cry-

ing, "The rotten killers, I'll show them!" He spun the cylinders of his two guns and ran to his horse.

"What yuh goin' to do, Jim?"

"I'm goin' to Sterling and tear it apart till I get the truth!" shouted Jim. "Then I'll smoke down those killers one by one! Dad! I'll get them for yuh!"

"Wait!" cried the nester. "Go slow! Even the sheriff's with them. Yuh can't go alone against 'em all! They'll kill yuh before yuh start! Wait!" But Jim was already racing north, his dark eyes blazing and his face a granite mask.

A wisp of a moon rose above the horizon as he rode madly on. As the trail swung to the right to follow a canyon rim, four men rose from cover with levelled guns, and fired.

A shot grazed Jim's bronc, and the animal swerved off the trail toward the precipice. A huge man was drawing a bead on Jim's heart. Jim spurred and swung the bronc with all his force; the beast reared wildly on its hind legs at the very canyon edge, and stopped the bullet meant for the rider.

The stricken horse screamed and tottered on the brink. Jim flung himself clear of the saddle, but the leap landed him on the treacherous rock of the canyon rim. The huge man came up for another shot, and Jim recognized him. "Lucas!" cried Jim. "Yuh rat, I'll get yuh!" He reached for his gun; then the crumbled rock under his feet gave way, even as his bronc collapsed a few feet away.

Man and horse fell into the black depths of the canyon at the same instant. Seconds later there was a series of thuds, as of bodies ricocheting down the rocks—then a splash, and silence.

Lucas grinned. "Let's go to town," was all he said.

The next day they found the bronc and Jim's gun at the spot where he had been ambushed and his hat a mile down the river. Of the body there was no trace. "He must of washed on downstream further," they agreed.

Returning to town, Lucas exhibited the hat and gun, and announced that Jim Cranford had been shot resisting arrest. A shudder of despair went over Sterling County. Cranford was gone! What hope was left now?

GRACE LEE went about dressed in black now, but somehow she could not fully believe that Jim Cranford was dead. Jim had loved her and she loved him; there would never be anyone else. "Wait for me, Grace," he had said, and she was still waiting. She could not accept the grim facts, could not tear the hope out of her heart.

Sid Lucas joined her one day as she was walking down the street.

"Hello," she said. She hated the man. When Jim was home Lucas had never dared speak to her, had merely followed her hungrily with his eyes. Now, however, he was smirking, bold, half possessive. But she did not dare turn him away for her father's sake. Old Lee had quavered, "Better be civil to Lucas, Grace. He's threatened me. We've got to be on the good side of him."

Lucas was explaining that his men, watching for a bandit, had shot Cranford in the darkness by mistake. "I hope yuh don't hold it against me," he added. "We oughta be good friends. I'm a good friend to have, and a bad enemy, Grace." He grasped her arm possessively. "I'll be seein' yuh tonight?"

Her heart felt like lead. "I suppose so," she said dully.

Many strangers, mostly crooks and badmen, flocked into Sterling in the following months. There was Scar Norwalk, a rustler from the White Mountains, who came with several friends. Things had become too hot for him in his old haunts, so he fled to Sterling for refuge, saw that the pickings were good here, and decided to locate.

Charlie Thomas, agent for an unscrupulous Eastern packer, came to establish connections and buy cheap beef from the local rustlers. Loud, flashily dressed, a show-off, he was quickly attracted to Grace and sought her company constantly.

The Rosarios, notorious bandits from old Mexico, passed through Sterling. They were two brothers, Jose and Miguel, swarthy and sinister, their shoe-button eyes darting everywhere. Walden approached them with an offer to join his gang but they refused. "No, señor," said Jose. "We play what you call—lone hand!" They loaded two pack horses with supplies and rode out of town again.

There was also Whisperin', a ragged vagrant who drifted into town one morning and attached himself to the Diamond Saloon. He was young, his regular, even-featured, thin-lipped face with its faint scar lines seemed strong, but Sterling soon found he was no good. He spoke only in a husky whisper; his weak eyes were covered by tinted glasses, and he seemed a coward. He did not carry a gun, and at the challenges and insults of toughs he simply shook his head and walked away.

He became general roustabout at the Diamond Saloon, ran errands, cleaned up, took an occasional shift at tending bar. The patrons scornfully ignored him. Men drank and quarreled and gambled, outlaws held whispered conferences over future crimes. Meanwhile, silent as ever, Whisperin' would come to their very elbows, wielding his broom, and they would continue as though he were not there. He was harmless, despised.

One evening the cattle buyer came to the Diamond Saloon and bought the house for the night, treating all who came to unlimited free drinks to gain good will for his company. Unrestrained drunkenness followed. Occasionally someone shot at Whisperin's feet to make him jump. A dozen quarrels broke out.

Crease Walden and Scar Norwalk were in one corner shouting at each other. "There's plenty of room for both of us workin' this territory," roared the White Mountain rustler. "Either you cut me in or I'll force my way in, Walden!"

Walden cursed the other savagely. A Walden tough named Stark stepped in and struck Norwalk in the mouth. Capper interfered and restored peace.

A group of gunmen boasted of their killings. Joining them, Stark drew his gun and pointed out the four notches on the butt.

Someone said, "'Bout time yo're addin' that fifth, Stark—the one for old Cran—"

"Shut up, yuh fool!" snarled Stark.

The other laughed drunkenly. "Aw, be yoreself. Yo're among friends, ain't yuh? We all know yuh had a hand in that, and there's nothin' to worry about, now the cub's gone."

The crowd broke up late.

THE next morning an early riser noticed a paper pinned to the sheriff's bulletin board, that had not been there the night before. It was printed in pencil and read:

WARNING

To Joe Stark
Bill Loring
Monk Ferrel
Capper Munn
Sid Lucas
Crease Walden

The murder of my father will be avenged.

JIM CRANFORD

Stark's name had been crossed out.

Soon a group gathered about the bulletin board, talking excitedly. Someone roused the sheriff. Lucas came out, sleepy and sullen from a hangover.

"What's up?"

"Look—that note!"

Lucas read and laughed. He tore down the paper. "Bunk! Some fool practical joker! Cranford's dead!"

"Stark's name was crossed out," said a cowboy.

"Well, what of it? You don't think—" Lucas began and then shrugged. "Okay, I'll go see him. But he won't thank me for wakin' him at this hour!"

Joe Stark was beyond waking. They found him in his hotel room, on the floor, dead. His face was contorted with horror. An unfired gun was in his hand and three bullets in his chest.

At noon Grace Lee and Lafe Jennings chanced to meet in front of the general store. Lafe had been the Cranford's trusted foreman; he worked for Walden now, with stifled hate in his heart.

Grace asked breathlessly, "Lafe, you've heard? Do you think Jim is really alive?"

"I wouldn't build up any hopes, Grace," said Lafe gently. "Some drunken fool fixed that note. Why wasn't it written instead of printed, so that those of us who know Jim's handwritin' could really know?"

"Maybe that's it! Maybe he doesn't want anyone to be sure just yet," suggested Grace.

Lafe shook his head.

Whisperin' came by, tipping his hat to Grace. She nodded absently as he passed. "I think I'll have to marry Lucas eventually," she said dully. "I'd sooner die, but it's for Dad's sake." She clenched her hands. "If Jim would only come!"

"If he only would!" echoed Lafe. "I'd follow him through the gates of hell!" He shrugged, said, "Why talk about impossible things?" and went on.

That afternoon the Big Three held a conference in a quiet corner of the Diamond Saloon.

"Whoever wrote that note put the right names down," began Crease, spare and hawk-like.

"The killer made that yellow Stark talk before he shot! How else would he know?" said Lucas.

"A hundred ways," said Crease. "We shoulda done that job by ourselves; those three roughnecks talk when they're drunk. Everybody's got a pretty good idea about old Cranford's finish. But what's the note got to do with Stark's killin', anyway?"

"Why it's plain—" Lucas began.

"Crease is right." Wizened little Capper interrupted the sheriff. "The note was a drunkard's fool joke. It wasn't written by the hombre who plugged Stark, though the killer mighta seen it and crossed out Stark's name when he got through. No, we've got to look elsewhere for that shootin', and my guess is Scar Norwalk!"

Crease nodded thoughtfully. "My idea, too. Stark hit him at the party, and he got even." He drummed on the table, his cold gray eyes narrow. "We got to tend to that hombre; give him the works. He's gettin' too cocky around here anyway. Tomorrow, say?"

"Right," said Lucas, raising his huge bulk from his chair. Capper nodded.

"Funny nobody heard those shots," remarked Capper.

"That's easy," laughed Crease. "Everybody was pie-eyed except a few hombres like Whisperin' here. How about it, Whisperin', did yuh hear anything?"

Whisperin' kept on mopping as he shook his head no.

THREE of Norwalk's gang had been bought off by Capper. The rest of the out-of-town bunch, including the leader, rode out to Walden's mountain cabin the next day with Crease. The local rancher was genial and hospitable, promised the Norwalk crew a third share of the rustling profits, and circulated the bottles freely.

Suddenly Crease excused himself, ducked outside, and the next moment a score of gunmen, outlaws and deputies intermingled, rushed the cabin from all sides. It was more of a massacre than a battle. Norwalk and his three attendants were quickly disposed of, while the Big Three lost only one man.

This grim lesson impressed all with two points—"Don't horn into Sterling County! Don't harm anyone connected with the Big Three."

The empty mockery of Sterling County law was gone through with, the victims were buried.

Shortly after this a pair of masked road agents began to work the trails out of Sterling, robbing many travelers. They were vicious gunmen who shot at the faintest show of resistance. Some thought it was the Rosarios.

Meanwhile, the Eastern cattle buyer offered poor prices, so the Big Three decided to continue sending their stolen herds to Mexico. His dickering over, Charlie Thomas still lingered to see Grace Lee. He was a harmless windbag, and the girl found him more tolerable than the brutal, hulking Lucas. But the sheriff flamed with jealousy, and ordered his deputy, Loring, to break it up. Loring stopped Grace and Thomas on the street, sent the girl on and beat the cattle buyer's face to a pulp.

The next night there was an aftermath. It was late, the saloon was closing up, and Crease and Lucas stood talking near the front door. Nearly everyone had gone home long ago, and the dark street was deserted.

Loring passed the two, saying good night. The next moment Crease grew rigid and seized his companion's arm.

"Look—out there!"

The windows of the saloon threw great rectangles of yellow light across the blackness of the street outside. Loring stood in the farthest of these rectangles, staring into the night beyond. He was a picture of stark terror. Beneath a face gone sickly gray his jaw dropped, his hands hung limp at his sides. For the space of three breaths he stood so, then his right hand clawed at his gun, cleared the holster. Two red flashes stabbed at him out of the darkness with a roar, and Loring fell without firing.

"Come on!" shouted Crease. He and Lucas raced outside. Quickly they bent over Loring, but he was already dead. They looked up and down the street. There was no one to be seen, and no sound but the chirping of crickets.

The pair ran back into the saloon. "Murder! Turn out pronto!" shouted Crease to the bartender and the remaining patrons. "This way, Sid, out the back door. He'll be gettin' away up the alley!"

As they rushed through the back room Lucas bumped against someone, cursed and whipped out his gun.

Crease cried sharply, "Who's that?"

Lucas grunted disgustedly as he peered into an even-featured, dark-spectacled face, heard a whispered explanation about "hunting that extra case of Bourbon." "Hell, it's only Whisperin'. Come on!" They went on into the alley, raced in opposite directions, found nothing.

But a single idea filled Lucas' heavy one-track brain. Seething with red fury, he went on and burst into Charlie Thomas' cabin to find Thomas reading there alone.

"What's wrong, sheriff?"

"Never figgered yuh'd have the guts to shoot it out with Loring," gritted Lucas. "Now let's see yuh shoot it out with Loring's boss!"

"For gosh sake, Lucas!" cried the cattle buyer frantically. "I don't know what you're talkin' about. My gun ain't been fired for weeks. Look and see!"

"Get up and take it, coyote!" roared Lucas. He cursed and goaded the terror-stricken man, and at last Thomas rose and made his play. Lucas beat him to the draw easily and shot him down, Thomas' gun discharging harmlessly as it fell.

On the way back to the saloon the sheriff halted abruptly at his bulletin board and struck a match. There was what he had feared to find—a fresh duplicate of the Cranford note. Only, on this copy, Loring's name had also been crossed out. "I will avenge my father's death," Lucas read aloud.

Slowly his fury evaporated and changed to fear.

A sleepy crowd began to gather. "What's all the shootin'?" asked someone.

"Nothin' I can't handle," shouted Lucas. "Go back to bed!"

That was the beginning of uneasiness in the Big Three spread. Monk Ferrel, who stood third on that killers' list, went about with guns and nerves at hairtrigger tension. Capper Munn threw guards about the town to stop everyone after nightfall and put Ferrel in charge of things generally.

Crease Walden jeered. "Foolishness! Norwalk drilled Stark, the buyer got Loring and we got both of them. The paper's from the same fool joker. Stark and Loring bein' in on the Cranford killin' with us is just a coincidence."

"Coincidence hell!" growled ferret-like Capper. "That paper was posted two minutes after Loring died—and his name was crossed off. I tell yuh there's somebody after us, a sort of phantom gunman—Jim Cranford, or somebody posin' as him."

"Not Jim Cranford, damn yuh!" shouted Lucas in swift fury. "I saw him die!"

"Keep yore head, Sid," advised Crease. "If yuh hadn't flew off the handle and gunned Thomas so quick, we mighta checked him up."

"Whoever it is, we got to get him or he'll get us!" finished Capper. "And I'm watchin' every bet!"

Capper had spies out through the county. He even sent men to track down the road agents. Election Day was drawing near, with the sheriff's office falling vacant. Capper sent for the candidate opposing Lucas, a grizzled nester, and spoke very forcefully; the nester withdrew from the running. Unopposed for the office, Lucas would have a walkaway.

Capper also sent for Lafe Jennings. "Yuh used to come to town once a month; now it's every day or so. What's the idea?"

"Maybe fer a look at the tall buildings," replied Lafe airily.

"Can the wisecracks, puncher!" snarled Capper. "We've got no use for yuh. Take a tip and stay out of Sterling from now on!" The old Cranford ex-foreman had to obey.

Capper overlooked no possibility; he even wrote to a nation-wide detective agency, enclosing a check and an old photograph of Jim Cranford. Meanwhile, Crease scoffed and Lucas was busy elsewhere with Grace Lee.

Three days before election Lucas swaggered into the saloon, cuffed Whisperin' good humoredly, slapped Ferrel on the back and cried to the bartender to set up the house. Crease understood the reason for this outburst; he had seen Lucas kiss Grace publicly in parting, watched her walk away now, tight-lipped, her head held high. Grace had agreed to marry Lucas.

"Does she love yuh fer yore looks or yore disposition?" drawled Capper.

"She hates me, I reckon." Lucas drank and laughed. "But she's marryin' me just the same!" His brutal face was aglow with wolfish triumph. "That's why I drygulched Cranford; that's why I throwed in with yuh—to get her! And fer the girl I'd do it again, phantom and all!"

That night the phantom struck again.

AT midnight Ferrel started out to inspect the outposts. He walked from the Diamond Saloon toward the southern edge of town—a distance of three hundred yards, with guards stationed at both places. There was only starlight. Ferrel had gone down the dark street about halfway when shots rang out—then a cry.

They found Ferrel stretched in the roadway, his unfired gun in his hand. His animal-like face was ghastly, but he was not yet dead. He seized Crease's arm with a convulsive grip and gasped, "Cranford! It's Jim Cranford!"

It was too dark there to discern

faces; one could see only the outline of men's bodies, black against the starry night. "It couldn't 'a' been Cranford!" said Crease. "Yuh couldn't 'a' seen him clear enough to know!"

"But I heard his voice! I knew Jim Cranford for years. I couldn't be wrong . . . on that . . ." Blood gushed to Ferrel's lips. Crease wiped it away and Ferrel went on. "Jim said, 'Hello, Ferrel!' and I stopped. He said, 'Turn around, rat. I'm givin' yuh a chance, like yuh didn't give my dad. Make yore play!' Then—" Ferrel broke off and laughed crazily.

"It's Jim Cranford back from the dead," he continued again. "He came back to get me—to get yuh all!"

It was a few minutes later that two men carried the dying killer away.

Lucas had struck a match, picked up something now from beside the spot where Ferrel had lain. The Big Three gathered close to stare at the scrap of paper. "Ferrel's name crossed off!" whispered Lucas.

"Coincidence, Crease?" drawled Capper.

Crease shook his head. "Stark, Loring, Ferrel gone! Only us three left now."

"Blow out that match!" barked Capper. "Want him to pot-shoot us?"

Lucas said, "He don't work that way. He'll shoot it out with us, like he did with the others." He stared into the night, added in a strange, hoarse voice, "Maybe it *is* Jim Cranford. Who else could throw a gun like that?"

"Come on! Are we goin' to take this sittin' still? Snap out of it!" snarled Capper. "Call out every man. We're movin' against this hombre pronto, with all we've got! Pick yoreselves a spot. Me, I'm searchin' Sterling from top to bottom. Maybe he ain't out of town yet."

"I'll go out and nab them road agents!" Lucas had caught fire from Capper's example. "Maybe they're the ones. Any shot in the dark's worth tryin'."

"I'll take half the gang and comb the ranges," said Crease. "Let's go!"

Though there was furious activity that night, the searchers were handicapped by the fact that they did not know just whom they were looking for. Capper ransacked Sterling and found nothing. Using secret information and a decoy, Lucas trapped the pair of road agents and shot them to death. Unmasked, the bodies proved to be those of the Rosario brothers, as had been expected.

Crease's party accomplished nothing for all their hard riding and questioning of sleepy cowmen. But as the next day dawned, they found crudely lettered placards scattered everywhere, nailed to trees and fence posts, saying, "Vote for Jim Cranford for sheriff!"

Crease cursed like a madman when he saw that. His men destroyed all the signs they came across, but enough remained for all of Sterling County to read.

A strange stirring ran through the region like a hidden wave. Almost every voter went to the polls. Perhaps they were moved by remembrance, or by blind hope that persisted in spite of facts. Perhaps it was simply a cynical, secret protest against things as they were, a preference for a dead honest man over a live scoundrel. At any rate, they cast their ballots in a strange way.

The election board was composed of honest men, chiefly because the Big Three had never gone to the trouble of replacing them. Late election night, the last vote counted, the chairman of the board announced the results.

"Jim Cranford is elected sheriff by a majority over Sid Lucas," he wrote. "Though Cranford was not a regular candidate, his name was written in by the individual voters, which is perfectly legal. Also, though Cranford is reported killed on the best authority, yet he has not been legally declared dead. Therefore, his election stands."

Lucas was made acting sheriff in

Cranford's absence; if Cranford did not appear to take office within thirty days, then Lucas, as runner-up, would get the position by forfeiture.

Old-timers shook their heads. There had been a reign of bloodshed and terror, and now the climax—a dead man placed in the sheriff's chair! Few noticed that those slain, whether members of the Big Three or their victims, were all scoundrels and criminals; not a single honest man had perished since Jim Cranford.

There was nothing on the bulletin board when Lucas returned late from seeing Grace; but several sleepless hours later he went out into the dawn and found this:

At the Diamond Saloon—tonight at ten.
SHERIFF JIM CRANFORD.

At this the Big Three assembled. Lucas was fatalistic; to his primitive, superstitious mind the ghost of his victim was returning for vengeance. Crease was bewildered, could only stare. But Capper was glad; at last the baffling search for an unknown was over and the showdown near.

"Boys, our phantom gunman's foot has slipped at last. This time he's committed suicide!" Capper cried.

"What d'yuh mean?" asked Crease.

"He's always done what he said he would, ain't he?" Capper replied. "Never disappointed us, and he won't disappoint us now. Come hell or high water, he aims to be at the saloon at ten tonight. Well, we'll be ready for him!

"Warn everybody to stay at home. Surround the saloon with torches and bonfires. Light up the ground so a mouse can't cross without bein' seen. Plant all our men in ambush with orders to shoot to kill everyone who comes. Then whether the phantom travels alone or with a crowd tonight, let him come!"

"But the thing'll spread around. He's bound to hear and stay away!" protested Crease.

"He'll hear, but he'll come anyway!" laughed Capper. "The way I figger this mysterious hombre, it's a matter of pride with him never to go back on his word to us. He's plumb locoed thataway! Sid, yuh'll see he's real enough and no ghost. We'll wait in the saloon. If he gets past the gang alive, which a million to one he won't, we might get the chance to throw lead into him, Crease!"

Crease, his hawk face agleam, smiled cruelly.

NINE o'clock. A dark, cloudy night. All was ready, the trap set. The Big Three waited in the Diamond Saloon, playing stud. Half a dozen loungers, whose curiosity was greater than their fear, were there also.

"Fill 'em up again!" shouted Lucas. "Come on! Where's that bottle?"

He lurched toward the bar and collided heavily with Whisperin'. With a snarl he struck the roustabout and sent him sprawling. Whisperin' picked himself up, his face expressionless, and went on mopping the floor.

The three snarled at each other over their game and watched the hands of the clock creep around.

Lucas said, "Ferrel heard Cranford's voice."

"Nothin' to it," scoffed Crease. "Dyin' men get locoed notions sometimes. Wonder who it really is and what's his game, this fake Cranford?"

"I've stopped thinkin' about that," answered Capper. "We bumped off Norwalk and Thomas and the Rosarios on the chance that one of them was our man, and we were wrong. Now ferget it, and wait. Soon we'll know!"

"We've done a lot of killin'," said Lucas. "The Cranfords, young and old—"

"Stop harpin' on that, yuh blockhead!" barked Crease.

"Here's yore mail, Capper," said the bartender. "It's been layin' here since mornin'." Impatiently Capper waved him away.

The bartender watched him. How

strange that this hard, desperate trio, who with their gang had terrorized the entire country, should themselves be terrorized in turn by one man!

Now the time was growing short and the three threw down their cards and lined up against the bar, facing the front door, guns ready. Crease peered out through a crack in the window shade. The fires made it as bright as day outside; the gang crouched, ready. Whisperin' finished his task and went into the back room. The bartender stopped polishing the bar. Except for the hoarse breathing of the men and the tick of the clock, there was no sound in the room. It was nearly ten.

Crease's laugh grated in the silence. "Hell! We're a pack of fools! He won't come! How *could* he come?"

The clock struck—ten measured, clanging strokes. All eyes in the room stared at it as though fascinated. As the last stroke died away there was a breath of air, the ghost of a sound. They all spun around as one man.

At the back room door stood Whisperin'. His even-featured face was tense and hard. His tinted glasses were off, and for the first time they really noticed his eyes—dark, keen, blazing. There were two gunbelts about his waist now, his hands tensed above the gun butts. He spoke in a deep, mellow voice that filled the room.

"Make yore play!"

It was a voice they all knew beyond any doubt—the voice of Jim Cranford.

The Big Three stared.

This thing could not be. Jim Cranford, whom they had slain, could not be alive! Yet the man with the familiar face of Whisperin' had Jim Cranford's eyes, Jim Cranford's voice. Again he was talking, in tones that rang as hard as iron, "Make yore play, yuh murderin' coyotes. I'm Jim Cranford!"

Crease made the first break, lurching sideways as he clawed for his holster. Jim Cranford's guns seemed to leap from their holsters like twin striking snakes, and roared Walden's death song.

Capper was next in the line. He cleared leather, but before he could level his weapon, two slugs caught him in the chest, and he died without firing. Then Lucas—in the fraction of a second that had elapsed he had time to draw, but just as he pulled trigger, Cranford shot, and Lucas' convulsive grip sent his bullet wild. Lucas held himself erect with an arm across the bar and fired again. Cranford jerked and steadied, returned the fire with both guns, and Lucas went down.

Wisps of acrid gunsmoke curled upward. Cranford turned his blazing eyes on the bystanders as he waved them away from the door. They scuttled like sheep into a far corner, huddled there harmlessly. Outside, the gang, amazed at the outburst of gunfire in their midst, came from their hiding places and gathered at the front door.

There were shouts of "Capper! Lucas! What's wrong in there?"

A gunman opened the door, stared for a moment at the scene within, at his leaders stretched on the floor. With a gasp he reached toward his hip, but Cranford, guns levelled at his heart, cried, "Leave it there!" The man's fingers jerked away from his gun butt as though the touch burned him, and he slammed the door to.

Jim Cranford took the nickeled star off Lucas' shirt and pinned it to his own. "In the name of the law, throw down yore guns!" he cried. He levelled his guns at the closed door, ready for a rush. Outside, the leaderless ruffians whispered together, uncertain.

Suddenly a swarm of men swept out of the night upon them. A warning shot went over their heads, a cry rang out, "Throw 'em up pronto!" The tables were turned; the gangsters had been drawn from their hiding places, now stood outlined in the light of their own fires. Two or three resisted and were shot down; the rest of them surrendered without a struggle.

Lafe Jennings burst into the saloon and at the sight of him Jim grinned and put his guns away. The two compared watches. "We came about twenty seconds late," said Lafe.

"Close enough," laughed Jim.

"Yo're bleedin', boy!" cried the old ex-foreman.

"A scratch! Bullet raked my ribs," said Jim. He took a glass of whiskey from the trembling bartender and dashed it on the wound. "Stay here in charge, Lafe. I'll tend to the rest."

As Jim started away Lucas opened his eyes and called faintly. Jim went to the ex-sheriff's side. He stooped down and Lucas ran exploring fingers over his arm. "Don't savvy this, but reckon . . . yo're real, Jim. Mind shakin' hands?"

Jim pressed the hand in silence. "Reckon yuh win everything . . . girl and all!" said Lucas. "Well, I'd . . . do it . . . all over again!" His breathing rattled. Then his defiant grin became fixed and his head fell back.

Jim laid the body down and went outside. He gave orders to Lafe's men, sent part of them to lock up the prisoners. Gradually the group dispersed and Jim was left alone beside a glaring bonfire.

Then a slim, white-clad figure came out of the darkness toward him. It was Grace Lee, who had been waiting. She approached slowly, peering at his face—at his straight nose and flat cheeks and thin lips, and the fine scar lines at the edge of his jaw. A despairing sob burst from her quivering lips. "No, no, it can't be!" As she came a step closer and he faced toward the fire, suddenly her violet eyes brightened. She gasped, "Jim Cranford's eyes! Why—"

Jim asked in his deep, mellow voice, "Grace, don't you know me?"

The next moment Grace was in his arms, her arms about his neck. "Jim! Jim! You've come back! I thought you were dead!"

Jim held her close. "Come," he said gently. "I'll take yuh home."

Meanwhile at the saloon the bodies had been taken away, and Lafe, with several men, stood guard outside. The loungers gathered at the bar, talking excitedly. How could that be Jim Cranford? Cranford didn't look anything like this hombre!

The bartender said, "Here's Capper's mail. He'll never need it now." He opened the envelopes to find a couple of circulars. Then at the sight of a letter, he stiffened. "Get this, boys!" he cried, while the others closed around.

REPORT ON JAMES CRANFORD.

Dear Mr. Munn:

We finally traced James Cranford to the Mountain City Hospital. He arrived there last April, suffering from several broken ribs and a broken arm, his face terribly smashed and infected. He explained he had fallen over a cliff, landing by chance on a ledge part way down the side, which saved his life. Afterwards he had drifted downstream on a raft until rescued by cowboys.

After Cranford was out of danger several operations were performed on his face, plastic surgery being used to remedy his disfigurement. It was highly successful. When the plastic surgery was finished, Cranford had a new face —even, well proportioned features in place of his former irregular ones, and only a few very faint scars showed.

After a four-month stay, when Cranford was about to leave the hospital, he asked the chief surgeon, "Would folks who knew me all my life ever recognize me now?"

"Not a chance," declared the surgeon.

"We'll see," said Cranford, as he went away. We believe that Cranford, posing as a stranger, is now in your very midst, unrecognized.

We enclose a photograph from the hospital records of James Cranford as he appears now.

Respectfully,

STANDARD DETECTIVE AGENCY.

The bartender laid down the letter that had been read too late, and stared at the photograph. "So the whisperin' roustabout I've been orderin' around was really Jim Cranford!"

THE next night Grace and Jim were on the Lee ranch house porch under the moon. "After that plastic surgery I couldn't be recognized ex-

cept by my eyes and my voice; so I used dark glasses and a fake whisper to fix that," said Jim. "I came back to get even for Dad's death—hung around the saloon until I got a clue. Then I cornered Stark alone, forced him to tell who the others were, then beat him to the draw. Afterward I went after the others, one by one, in a fair fight. Soon as the shooting was over I put my gunbelt under my shirt and ducked. The gang saw me, said, 'It's only Whisperin',' and rushed on by to find the killer!

"I put Lafe Jennings wise and he got together some close-mouthed men he could trust. After that strange election I had official standin'. Lafe's boys were ready and it was time to come out in the open for the showdown. I reckon that's all."

"But why didn't you tell me you were here—alive?" asked Grace.

"I couldn't. I had a big job to do. Yuh'd have worried even more. Better for yuh not to know till it was over." He sighed. "Well, it's over now. Dad can rest easy in his grave."

"Yes, that's ended," said Grace.

"When yuh didn't recognize me I had a strange feelin', as if I'd lost yuh," said Jim. "Does it matter to yuh, my face bein' changed? Do yuh feel that I'm a stranger?"

She looked at him smiling. "You look better than before, Jim, but appearance doesn't matter anyway. I know that inside you're the same Jim Cranford I've always known."

"Then somethin' new is just beginnin'," said Jim. The hard lines had faded out of his face, his dark eyes were soft, adoring. Gently he drew her toward him. "I mean our life together, Grace. I've always loved yuh—if yuh'll have me."

Wordless, she raised her radiant face to his.

The Youngest Brand Expert

ALREADY, at four years of age, Miss Frances Peters, of Midland, Texas, is accounted a cattle brand expert. She can draw accurately, name and identify more than sixty Texas cattle brands, and is learning more every day.

Her father, Marion Peters, is a famous collector of cattle brand drawings, especially those of Texas ranges, past and present.

For ranch children to learn to know cattle and brands, as well as something about tracks and "sign" at an early age, is not extremely unusual, however.

Jeanne Ellis, four-year-old ranch girl of Tecolotenos, N. M., can already identify most of a hundred-head herd of her father's cattle. All the cows in this little bunch are named, and little Jeanne knows most of them at a glance. She rides her own horse all over her father's mountain cattle range with her parents, and she has noticed her daddy's method of locating cattle by tracks so often that when she read "Little Bo-Peep has lost her sheep and don't know where to find them," Jennie's comment was as follows:

"Well, goodness, Bo-Peep must be pretty dumb! I think she could at least look around and find some tracks!"

Show 'Em, Cowboy!

By Myrtle Juliette Corey

To cook or not to cook, that was the question! Such a predicament faced Brady Wilson, bronc-buster par excellence, when all the time he longed to perform some heroic act that would enable him to cut a figure in the eyes of pretty Doreen.

BRADY WILSON drew in his horse at the crest of a ridge about a mile out of town, to gaze down into the valley at the cluster of houses and stores with the railroad loading chutes and corrals which comprised Baxter. Then he turned in the saddle for a sweeping look over the surrounding country.

"This range sure suits me," he mused aloud. "Next thing is to find some outfit that's looking for a first-class cowpuncher."

Grinning at his own conceit, he displayed a double row of white, even teeth. His gray eyes twinkled while tiny lines radiating from their corners betrayed a sense of humor.

Brady had drifted up from Arizona with the determination to locate himself somewhere in western Colorado, a section which had always appealed to him. But a week's search discovered no outfit in need of his services, while an unlucky session of poker had made it imperative that he connect with some paying occupation within a few hours.

Horse, saddle and equipment were of the best, which would assure any discerning eye that Brady Wilson was a good hand, an asset to any ranch payroll. However, luck was against him, for there happened at that time to be an oversupply of first-class cowpunchers in that section.

He rode slowly into town to dis-

mount in front of the general store. As he looped one rein about the hitch-rail the screen door at the top of the steps was pushed open and held by a cowboy whose face was wreathed with smiles as he bowed awkwardly to the girl who emerged, several parcels in her arms.

"Thanks, Bud," she said, her voice like the unexpected chiming of a silver bell on clear morning air.

Already Brady's glance was unobtrusively enveloping her, not a contour of her lovely features and graceful figure escaping his eye. Soft tendrils of brown hair with bronze high-lights evaded the confinement of her straw hat, the brim of which was cleverly turned back to frame the sweet oval of her face.

Thick lashes, exactly matching the curls which caressed her forehead and half concealed the pink-lobed ears, fringed eyes of so brilliant a blue that Brady could think of nothing in the world to match them. Her whole being radiated daintiness, the clear skin, just lightly touched with tan, the hands that were graceful and dimpled without being too small, the high-arched feet.

As she descended the steps her glance passed lightly over Brady, meeting his eyes for just an instant, to leave him with a breathless, helpless feeling. The cowboy she had called "Bud" was already clattering down the steps to follow her to an automobile standing at the end of the hitch-rack. He opened the car door, giving clumsy assistance with the parcels, but his only words were "Good-by, Doreen," as she drove away.

Not until girl and car disappeared around a corner, did Brady Wilson recover his powers of locomotion sufficiently to mount the steps and pursue his original intention of entering the store to make some inquiries.

"Doreen!" he exclaimed, under his breath. "Sounds as pretty as she looks. I'll sure stay around here, if I have to hold some rancher up for a job!"

Abel Barnes was more than willing to dispense information while he weighed out sugar and wrapped parcels for the group around the counter. But he shook his head lugubriously at Brady's questions.

"Ain't heard of anyone wantin' a cowpuncher," he wheezed, peering sharply at Brady from little eyes almost smothered with fat. "But here comes Jordan Gates—he's foreman for the Cross Bar, over Temeech way—he'll know if any of them ranchers are short a hand."

Brady Wilson didn't care for the appearance of the slender, self-assured fellow who pushed open the screen door with the manner of one who expects to command instant attention from all and sundry. He favored Brady with a supercilious glance, turning back to give him a cool stare as the storekeeper put a question.

"No," Gates drawled. "There isn't much demand around here for drifting cowpunchers." There was almost a sneer in the words.

Straight and steady, Brady's gray eyes looked into the greenish ones set in the narrow, closely shaven face of the Cross Bar foreman. Then, without comment, he swung around to a man standing nearby to engage him in a discussion of the surrounding country. Instantly Jordan Gates betrayed hostility. The manner of the stranger had too openly disregarded him, scorned his importance. Any retort would have been less exasperating than this calm ignoring of his presence.

The antagonism between the two men was mutual, with this difference—Brady Wilson actually dismissed Gates from his thoughts, but the latter held a rancor so lively that it demanded some outlet.

Since it was Saturday a number of ranchers were in town, but none was in need of a rider. As he strolled about, Brady again encountered the cowboy he had first seen on the steps of the store. From him, by diplomatic questions, was extracted the information that the girl who had driven off in the car, was Doreen Landis. That was all. Brady was too sensitive to his own

sudden interest in her to push his inquiries further.

Near the end of the afternoon it became a question as to whether there was any job in the entire neighborhood open to a cowpuncher. But as Brady Wilson's need increased, so with each advancing hour did his determination become greater; he would not leave the section of country that was home to Doreen Landis. Finally, as he strolled towards the post office, thinking he might encounter someone else from out of town, the storekeeper beckoned from his doorway.

"Hey," came in Barnes' wheezy voice. "Hey, young feller! I just heard of something, if you're right set on a ranch job."

"Sure am," Brady answered, turning to mount the steps.

Abel Barnes surveyed him for a moment with pursed lips. "We-ell," he said slowly, "Gates was just in here, on his way home, and he'd heard of a place on the Oliver Ranch—the Double O. They need a feller bad, soon's he can get there. One of their men broke both his legs this mornin'."

Wilson nodded as he heard the name of the outfit. To work under Jordan Gates would have been a pretty tough proposition. But he wondered why the storekeeper regarded him with that lurking doubt in his eyes. Probably the Double O was a hard outfit to work for. Brady squared his shoulders.

"Thanks," he said, "I'll head right that way." He was thinking. "I can stand it till I land something better. I've gotta stay till I get acquainted with Doreen Landis. Those blue eyes of hers have got all the magnets in the world beat. I couldn't ride away from here, nossir!"

Barnes gave explicit directions regarding the trail to the Double O. "Just tell Jude Oliver you've come to take Hank's place," he said, again giving Brady an odd, close look. He seemed about to add something, then closed his lips tightly as if to imprison the words.

"Anything the matter with Oliver's outfit?" the cowboy ventured, with a humorous glance.

"No, no—nothing a-tall," came the quick denial. "Jude's the finest hombre hereabouts. Couldn't tie to a better boss."

"Humph!" Brady ejaculated. As he turned away from the store, he thought. "There's something queer about the whole deal. Wonder what it is?"

But he headed at once for the Double O. It would take brisk riding to reach the ranch before dark and he had the urge of an empty stomach. As he rode from town he reflected that Doreen Landis had turned in that same direction when she drove off in the morning, which offered hope that she might live somewhere in the neighborhood of the Oliver outfit.

The sun was just vanishing below the peak of an upthrust mountain, leaving a golden glory diffused over the sky, when he turned from the highway to follow a grassy road towards the ranch buildings a half mile distant. The nearer he came, the more pleasant and well kept the place appeared. Besids the spacious ranch house his observant gaze located a roomy bunkhouse, numerous neat outbuildings and several pole corrals.

Brady smiled. Already he was aware of a comfortable, home-like feeling. "Looks good to me," he decided. "The next thing is to find Doreen."

Voices came from the bunkhouse. It seemed supper must be over, but the clear air bore the aroma of coffee, hinting that it was not too late for a warm meal.

As Brady approached the house a heavy-shouldered man whose roughly carved features indicated a character of some force, emerged from the door. He gave the cowboy a quick, keen glance.

Brady reined in. "Howdy," he said. "I guess you must be Mr. Oliver—my name's Brady Wilson. Heard you're looking for a man to replace someone

named 'Hank,' that had an accident today."

While he was speaking the cowboy was aware that another man came to the door, halting there to speak to someone inside the house. Only part of his figure was visible, but that was strongly suggestive of the Cross Bar foreman.

Oliver's eyes held a flicker of surprise as they glanced over the strange cowboy's horse and equipment. Then he said, "Sure—mighty glad to see you, Wilson. Didn't know what we were going to do—not a man around that could fill Hank's place. Light, and put your horse in the corral."

Before Brady could reply, the door opened and Gates emerged. For the second time that day his greenish eyes flickered over the cowboy, then he drawled, as he descended the steps:

"You said you'd be glad to go to work any place. I didn't know then about this job—but I'm sure it will just suit you." There was no particular expression in the tone, yet Brady felt an implied sneer.

Gates moved on across the yard to a horse that was tied to a tree, calling back, "So long, Oliver—see you soon."

"So long," the rancher returned, walking towards the corral at Brady's side. "There's a bunk in the cook shack," he went on, "and Hank slept there. I guess there's everything you'll need to get breakfast. In the morning you can get whatever you need from the storehouse—I'll give you the key."

Brady thought his ears must be playing him tricks. Before he could frame a question, however, the rancher said:

"We're up against it here without a cook, as my wife isn't well and my niece has all she can do at the house. Sure glad you came along."

Brady Wilson took a sudden, dizzying, mental somersault. "Well, I'll be damned!" he exclaimed to himself. "They've hired me for a *cook!* And it's a put-up job of that Mister Foreman Gates to humiliate me—humph!" Halting his stride, he was on the point of flat refusal when second thought restrained him.

"I haven't got a dime—and not another thing in sight. Guess I'll have to stick. And I'll hand that hatchet-faced fellow a surprise. Maybe he won't get such a big laugh, after all. There's one consolation—I can make sourdough biscuits around nine-tenths of the cooks I ever saw."

So Brady Wilson accepted the situation, grinning ruefully to himself as he spread his blankets in the former cook's bunk. He wondered what his recent mates would think if they knew of his predicament? "If I've got any enemies, they'd sure be tickled. But this ain't gonna last more'n a month; I'll get my pay and pull out. You can't keep a good cowpuncher down! I'm still within ridin' distance of Doreen. When I get through wrastlin' pots I'll look her up the first thing."

He was tired, and with that soothing thought Brady fell into a slumber which lasted so long he had to move at double quick time to build the fire and have breakfast for the five ravenous punchers who stormed the cook shack at break o' day. He was aware of their sidelong looks of appraisal.

"Guess they sense I ain't no ordinary cook," he grinned to himself, "but I ain't saying a word. Let 'em think what they like—some of these days I'll show 'em a thing or two. Then they can boast that they're the only hombres that ever was nourished by the culinary masterpieces of Brady Wilson, top cowpuncher of Arizona and Colorado."

He smothered the urge that rose within him as the men's spurs jingled off towards the corrals. Ever since he could remember, morning had meant mounting a horse to ride out over the range. For a few minutes he hated the big iron stove in the corner, wanted to fling the pots and pans as far as he could and run from the place. There was a sour note in his grin, now, as he surveyed the remains of breakfast, anticipating with sudden keenness the thirty other breakfasts he must prepare

before he could hit the trail with a month's pay in his pocket.

Oppressed by this thought, he moved to the doorway, throwing back his head to inhale a revivifying breath of the fresh morning air. But he stopped, mouth open, his entire body stiffening as if from the impact of a sudden blow.

The doorway of the ranch house kitchen, opposite, framed a vision of radiant loveliness. But Brady Wilson would rather have faced an array of forty-fives than the girl whose vivid blue eyes flashed a glance across the open space straight into his amazed ones. He believed there was a flash of surprise over her face, then her red lips formed a slight smile, a tantalizing, elusive smile, and she turned back into the house.

"Damn!" Brady exclaimed aloud, retreating hastily from sight. "How did she get here? . . . Oh!" Suddenly he understood. Oliver had mentioned a niece—Doreen Landis, of course. She lived at the ranch—it was her home.

He experienced no thrill of delight that he would be able to see her every day. Instead, not an inch of his six feet of muscular slenderness but blushed with the ignominy of his position. The bunkhouse cook! Could the pride of a top-hand suffer keener humiliation? And was a cowboy ever in a more exasperating predicament?

Sight of the cook stove now produced positive nausea. He would go away at once. But no—he couldn't. To leave now would be to cover himself with greater indignity than to stick it out for the month he originally intended. But even Brady Wilson's humor could find no amusement in the situation.

Fear of encountering the girl kept him within the shelter of the cook house. None of the men would be in for dinner and he delayed until long past the noon hour to go to the storeroom. Not until he no longer heard sounds of activity around the ranch kitchen, did he venture across the yard. Then he moved quickly with furtive glances over his shoulder. As he slipped the key into the padlock, he heard feminine voices issuing from an upstairs window in the big house. One he recognized as belonging to Doreen.

"She's safe up there," he thought, with a sigh of relief.

From the well-stocked shelves he selected supplies to last a couple of days. Glances at Doreen from safe concealment were preferable to personal encounters while he labored under the stigma of "bunkhouse cook."

As he emerged from the storeroom, the afternoon breeze bore words from that upstairs window straight to his ears.

"I thought he was a cowboy, when I saw him in Baxter that morning," came in the girl's clear, sweet tones.

"Lots of fellows that aren't any good at cowpunching fall back on cooking," an older, rather whining voice said. "We had one once before that was a fine cook, but he was too lazy to be any good on the range."

"Damn!" Brady muttered, his ears reddening. He quickened his steps, too. He didn't want to hear Doreen's reply to those comments. No matter what she said, right then it would be unendurable.

For some moments he cherished the idea that he would set a supper before the crew which would give every man in the outfit indigestion. In his present mood their sufferings would bring Brady Wilson positive enjoyment. But he repudiated that plan; no lasting balm for his pride could come from such a course. The only trail for him to take was the one that led through thirty days of cooking for the Oliver outfit. After that he'd show folks!

It was a relief when the men came to supper. They talked of range matters, of the experiences of a hard day working cattle on the rimrocks, of a hundred subjects that interested Brady. Momentarily he was able to forget that his had been the ignominious task of peeling the vegetables they ate with such gusto.

"You'd oughta 've seen the way that ornery black horse I was ridin' turned to buckin' when I got out on Rocky Point, today!" a lathe-like cowboy with carroty hair exclaimed. "He acted like he was close kin to that roan devil, Dynamite, over to the Cross Bar."

"Ha, ha!" burst out the square-faced straw boss. "An' I s'pose he didn't spill you none?"

"He did *not*. You're laughin', Duffy, because you got 'im on my string. Well, he ain't goin' to pile me!"

Duffy grinned. "Red sure thinks he can ride," he declared. "It's a wonder he don't go over to the Cross Bar and try Dynamite."

"I have thought about it," the cowboy asserted stoutly. "Somebody's going to ride that roan sometime—might as well be me. And I could find plenty of use for that five hundred simoleons Warner offers to the hombre that can stay with the buckin' roan devil."

"Must be some horse!" Brady exclaimed.

Duffy nodded emphatically. "He is. Worst one ever known around here. Thad Warner's had him to a lot of rodeos and nobody's ever rode him yet. Thad's a great gambler—loves a bet. He's offered five hundred dollars to any cowpuncher that can ride Dynamite slick, and stay till he quits buckin'."

The straw boss tilted his cup to drain the last drops of coffee, then turned back to Brady Wilson. "Talkin' of horses, that sorrel you rode in here looks as if he'd be a pretty good cow-horse."

"He's the best cut-horse I ever saw," Brady replied.

"Is that so?" Duffy's eyes sparkled. "How about a little trade? Seems too bad not to let him do his stuff."

"Ye-ah," Red put in. "You don't need a cut-horse to pack you around."

This reminder of his present status among the group of cowboys, nettled Brady. "My horse ain't for sale," he said with finality.

It wasn't easy to hold his tongue and accept the position so uncomfortably thrust upon him, but he knew it was not the time for explanations. If he could manage to hold out for the month, he would be in a position to do some laughing, himself.

The next day Brady contrived to keep close within his quarters. It seemed to him that he never had seen a girl so fond of walking out of doors as was Doreen. He knew that she did considerable work, yet she was continually appearing in the yard, and she passed the cook house five times on various trips to the corrals. She seemed to be much interested in the saddle stock. Each time he saw her, Brady's heart executed a new measure of syncopation. Never before had a girl so affected him. And the mere sight of Doreen Landis plunged him into a woeful state of bashfulness.

"Darn it!" he exclaimed. "If I had a good horse under me an' a rope in my hand, I wouldn't be scared none of her."

For forty-eight hours he successfully evaded speech with the girl. But luck turned on the third day. Doreen had not appeared since the noon hour, and a cautious reconnoiter of the premises encouraged belief that it would be safe to pay a visit to the corrals. Brady's horse had been turned into the pasture, but there were several likely-looking cow-ponies in the pole enclosure and it would be almost an adventure to go down and look them over. He felt like a released prisoner. The skies took on a deep blue; the air was sweet and balmy, while the mountains rimmed in the horizon with a beauty he never before appreciated.

Brady was engrossed in sizing up a smart-looking little bay, when he was startled almost into panic by a sweetly modulated voice at his very elbow.

"I've been looking for one of the boys to saddle a horse for me. Is there anyone around?"

He whirled to discover Doreen standing disturbingly close to his side. She was so much prettier than he had thought, when observing her from a

distance, that he was forced to swallow twice before he could speak.

"N-no," he stammered. "I—I mean there's nobody around but me. B-but I'll catch your horse and saddle him."

"Thanks," she returned. Was there just a shade of doubt in her tone? That suggestion brought the color to his face until he felt as if his cheeks were on fire. "I'll ride the gray," she said, turning back to the house and calling over her shoulder. "He's easy to catch. And I'll be ready in five minutes."

Brady glowered at the inoffensive gray. "Easy to catch! She thinks I don't know enough to rope a horse," he grumbled. "I'm sure gonna quit this job, pronto!"

His ire rose when the pony gave him no trouble at all. "You're nothin' but a darned old plug," he raged. "A mere baby could saddle you up. Why in blazes don't you show a little self-respecting spirit, so's I can let her see I ain't just a sourdough mixer?"

Although he accomplished the task quickly, Brady Wilson had never saddled a horse with such care. Doreen appeared as he fastened the latigo.

"Thanks," she said again, while her lips assumed the slight smile with which she had favored him on his first morning at the ranch.

That smile instantly melted his determination to depart. In fact, so mesmeric was its power that he could not even move from the spot where his feet seemed glued. She sprang lightly to the saddle and loped away.

"I sure act just like a dumb pot-wrastler!" he raged at himself, walking slowly back to the cook house. He had no further desire for exploration outside, even if the coast was clear. Seclusion, where he could anathematize the foreman of the Cross Bar, was what he wanted at that particular time.

"That Jordan Gates disliked me at first sight, and I guess the feeling was mutual, all right," he thought. "But I wonder if he's getting the fun he counted on, outa the poor joke he sprung. I'll get even with him sometime, but when I do, I'll be darned sure to get *my* laugh!"

Brady's rancor towards the Cross Bar foreman was not lessened that evening when, as he stood at the long table washing dishes, Gates rode into the yard, tying his horse with the manner of one familiar with the place, and walking nonchalantly to the house.

Brady Wilson had no ear for cowboy gossip that night. All his efforts at hearing were concentrated on the sounds brought from the ranch house on the evening breeze. These added to his state of unrest. Oliver's deep laughter came at intervals, then someone struck a few chords on the piano and Doreen sang. Brady took a seat on the bench outside the cook house. Never did ballads so enthrall a listener. If he only could have forgotten that she was singing to Jordan Gates, the cowboy would have been in an earthly heaven.

Presently a false note in the harmony was supplied by Duffy's nasal tones, audible from the bunkhouse. "Gates sure likes music—comin' three times a week to hold a concert. Wonder how long it'll be 'fore he coaxes the songbird over to the Cross Bar to stay?"

"Aw! I can't see what Miss Doreen'd want of that piano-playin' cowpuncher!" Red could be heard grumbling.

"Cowpuncher!" came scornfully in another voice. "He ain't no puncher. Jordan Gates is foreman—and don't nobody forget it! An' he's only a cowboy by adoption, anyhow; he ain't no son of the cow country!"

At that moment the song came to an end and Brady was glad. "So that hombre's playin' her accompaniments," he thought resentfully, jealously imagining the scene in the ranch house.

He remained on the bench until Gates took his departure, about an hour later. The voices of both Oliver and his niece were audible bidding the guest good night. He was gratified to discover that Doreen did not come out-

side for an added word with the Cross Bar foreman.

"Twenty-six more days o' cookin'!" Brady groaned. Then he hummed ironically:

"Eleven more months an' ten more days,
They're gonna turn me loose!
Eleven more months an' ten more days,
An' I'll be outa the calaboose!"

From that moment, something besides the coffee boiled in the cook house. With every hour he spent there, Brady's resentment mounted higher. "Mister Piano-Playin' Foreman better watch out when I cut loose from that stove," he vowed. "It'll be my turn to play a few jokes!"

Seemingly careless questions elicited from the boys no hint of where he might get a cowboy's job when the thirty days were up. But he doggedly assured himself that he would find one. And as much as possible he managed to keep out of Doreen's sight. Each time her glance rested on him, he could scarcely hold his head in its usual erect position, while his cheeks always burned hotly.

"Doggone it!" he thought. "She ain't goin' to be able to think of me as anything but a cook! It'll take me a long time to live this down. I'll have to do some lively cowpunchin' to make her forget seein' me mix sourdough and peel spuds for the Oliver crew!"

About every second day or evening Jordan Gates appeared at the Double O. His visits rasped Brady almost unendurably and he agreed with Red, who exclaimed at supper one night, when Gates had just ridden up to the house:

"If I was Thad Warner, I'd tell that feller I didn't want a foreman that did his bossin' by long distance. You'd think it was this ranch Jord Gates is runnin'!"

The second time Brady had speech with Doreen was late one afternoon. The Cross Bar foreman was at the house and it seemed a good opportunity to pay a visit to the storeroom, to reach which it was necessary to pass uncomfortably close to the kitchen door, and one could never tell when the girl might be busy there.

Just as he was bending over a sack to scoop sugar into his big tin can—and with no previous sound to warn of her approach—Doreen's voice startled him. Rising with a jerk, he found her at his side, as she had been on the former occasion at the corral. And the disturbing, elusive smile was again on her lips.

"I need some things," she said simply, "and I thought you would reach them down from the shelves for me."

"S-sure, sure—glad to," he mumbled, hating himself for the wave of confusion which washed over him. The late sunshine pouring through the doorway brought out the high-lights in her hair, fascinating him. He could scarcely remove his gaze from the soft curls capping her head, and when he did, he found himself in the fresh difficulty of looking straight into her eyes. He felt himself sinking down . . . down . . . into their intensely blue depths. This spell was not broken until she spoke; then her voice seemed to come from a long ways off.

"I want some coffee, some soda, and a bottle of that vanilla."

Brady turned to the shelf, dazedly trying to locate the articles. He reached down several cans, striving wildly to find something to say.

"No—no," Doreen halted him, merriment in her voice. "One can of coffee's enough. And vanilla, please—not iodine. And the soda's there, beside the rice."

Not looking into her face, he handed her the last article, then turned hastily to replace the extra cans of coffee on the shelf, hoping she would go at once. But she halted on the threshold with an exclamation.

"Oh! I almost forgot—I need flour."

Brady still had sense enough to remember that a sack of flour weighed fifty pounds. That was no burden for a girl.

"I'll carry it in for you," he offered, still without facing her.

She thanked him, moving to the threshold. But she waited for him to lift the sack and join her, keeping at his side as they went to the kitchen. "Just set the flour on that chair," she directed, as he started towards the bin that was pulled half out of the wall cupboard. "I'll fix it when I make the biscuits. And thanks a lot."

Temptation was too great. Again Brady looked at her, and she smiled—a real smile, this time, that dawned in her eyes to come into full radiance on her lips. He did not hear steps approaching through the dining room. With the stunning force of bullets came words edged with patronizing scorn.

"Oh! So you're cooking for the house, too!"

Brady turned his head to stare into Jordan Gate's greenish eyes. Doreen spoke instantly.

"No. He just helped me to carry in some supplies."

The Cross Bar foreman's gaze swept the kitchen, halted briefly at the flour bin, then came to Brady Wilson with real hatred. But he addressed the girl. "I see—but you don't have to go to the cook shack for help when I'm around. Why didn't you call me?"

"You're much too dressed up to be handling flour," she laughed.

Brady left the kitchen, but he could hear Gates commenting in derogatory tones, "That fellow's not like the boys you're used to around here; he's just a drifting no-account—glad to wrastle pots. You can't treat him friendly like you do our boys, because he won't understand. He'll take advantage."

"No?" Doreen's voice held a questioning inflection. "He is very polite—and quite shy."

"I tell you, you've got him wrong. Forgive me, Doreen, I don't like to see you stoop to be nice to such a worthless fellow."

"Indeed!" Now she spoke crisply. "There's no occasion for your criticism, Jordan—none at all."

"I think there is," he flared back with anger, "when you get him to carry in flour you don't need, just to have a chance to flirt with him!"

To Brady's astonishment Doreen's laughter rang out with infectious gaiety. "Don't be silly, Jordan!" Her voice came clearly, followed at once by the booming tones of Jude Oliver who had just come up from the corral, greeting the visitor with no idea of the recent scene.

Brady hurried back to the cook house. "Mi-gosh!" he breathed. "That flour bin *was* 'most half full. I wonder. . . ."

That wonder, combined with the exciting memories of his recent encounter, rendered Brady immune to the usual disgust with his cook's duties. And he allowed himself to dream that evening that Doreen had perhaps been curious to discover what he really was like. Maybe she was the tiniest bit interested. However, by morning his doubts returned. He remembered the laughter in her eyes as they stood in the storeroom.

"She's just having fun," he concluded. "She thinks I'm what her aunt said that afternoon when they was talking—I'm a no-good puncher that's fell back on cookin'!"

During the ensuing days, Brady sometimes felt sure that Doreen was watching him. But she made no further attempt at speech until almost a week had passed. Then she was quite impersonal, and she did not smile. In fact, she seemed to have erected a little barrier about herself. Brady wondered wrathfully if Gates had after all affected her with his remarks.

Meanwhile, there was excitement among the crew. Red had announced his intention of trying to ride the formidable roan bucking horse owned by Thad Warren of the Cross Bar. While his mates were ready to back him with encouragement, there was no feeling of confidence that he would make it. The best riders in the locality, including some famous rodeo hands, had failed. And while Red had plenty of assurance,

he lacked staying power—something essential to any man who would ride Dynamite to a finish.

The third Sunday of Brady Wilson's month as cook, was the one set for the contest. But on the previous Friday Red's horse fell, bruising his rider badly and breaking three ribs. At first Red was determined to ride Dynamite, anyhow. The matterwas under hot discussion at the corrals on Saturday afternoon, when Jordan Gates rode up.

"We'll put off that ride of Red's," Oliver told the Cross Bar foreman.

"Of course," Gates agreed in his usual manner of mingled superiority and patronage. "He wouldn't have a chance—be licked before he hit the saddle."

"Too bad," Doreen said sympathetically, aware of Red's disappointment. "I was all ready to go over and cheer for him."

"Maybe one of the other boys would like to try," Gates suggested, as one who believes he is uttering an absurdity.

But the words hit Brady Wilson like a sharp spur rowel. He continued to lean easily against the corral fence, but there was nothing languid in the expression of his eyes as he said coolly:

"Sure—I'll go over and give Dynamite a try."

All eyes turned towards the cook.

Jordan Gates laughed with loud abandon. "Good joke!" he gasped.

Brady drew himself erect. There was a calm smile on his lips, but his jaw set with determination. "No joke," he said. "I mean it. I'll be over Sunday."

Surprise, incredulity, then admiration for his audacity passed over the faces of the Double O cowboys. The rancher himself turned to give Brady a long, appraising glance. But Oliver's expression was inscrutable. Gates gave vent to another outburst of laughter.

"All right, Cookie," he said condescendingly, "I'll tell the boss."

Jude Oliver, Gates and the girl moved towards the house while the cowboys burst into eager argument. But Brady Wilson said little.

"Yes, I can ride pretty fair," he told Duffy. "I know what I'm about."

The straw boss shook his head. He believed that the new cook might have other than culinary attainments, but he knew too much about Dynamite to feel like encouraging Brady in such folly.

When he thought the matter over calmly, Brady was surprised at himself. "I'm considerable out of practice—ridin' buckers," he reflected, "and it looks like I've taken on something pretty big. But I couldn't stand it any longer—had to bust loose and do something. Now I've got to ride to win. I'm plumb sick of that Gates hombre laughin' so much around here!"

Arrived at the Cross Bar Ranch Sunday afternoon, Brady Wilson found a sizable crowd of neighboring ranchers and cowpunchers gathered there. Any hint of an attempt to ride the outlaw, Dynamite, always drew eager spectators. He felt a certain quietness in the atmosphere—a tenseness which was hardly warranted by such an event, and which could be accounted for only by the fact that he was unpopular with the crowd. "They think Jude Oliver's cook's got unlimited nerve to try to ride a horse that's thrown all the best riders in this end of the cow country," Brady decided.

Jordan Gates was very officious, dressed in his Sunday best, even his boots polished till they shone like a new stove. He went about, repeating the phrase he had coined for the occasion.

"Glad to see you out for the cooking exhibition. Dynamite's going to roll a sourdough biscuit for us directly."

"Maybe," Doreen Landis said, arching her brows oddly, when Gates sprung the remark on her.

While the Oliver crew had appeared more or less indifferent, natural loyalty for a member of their own outfit began to crop out. Brady's ear caught Red assuring Jordan Gates: "He may not

ride him slick, but I'll bet you a month's wages he will ride him."

"Thanks, Red," Brady said to himself, as he carried his saddle out into the big, round corral where the raw-boned roan had been cut out by himself.

Men were lined up around the fence, watching. For the most part, their expressions indicated that they already knew what the outcome would be. Brady laid the saddle down carefully on its side, then unbuckled his lariat. Disturbed by the crowd on the fence, and by the sight of man and saddle in the corral, Dynamite trotted nervously about, head up, emitting an occasional snort from his wide, full nostrils.

Brady ran out a small loop and with a neat, back-handed throw the rope snapped around the neck of the roan. He reared, striking at the rope with front feet, then charged a few times before allowing the cowboy to walk up to him. Brady took his time, but had no especial difficulty putting on hackamore and saddle. The outlaw had been saddled so often that he was no longer much disturbed over that part of the procedure.

From the corner of his eye the cowboy saw Doreen standing on the seat of a wagon that had been drawn up beside the corral to afford a good view for the women spectators. Her eyes were shining with excitement and her face mirrored a tense expression.

"I've got the opportunity I've been praying for," Brady Wilson told himself, his heart beating high as he prepared to mount. "And she's there watching—old Roany, you're as good as rode!"

The crowd had been exchanging good-natured jibes and offering free advice. But dead silence fell as Brady, a twisted ear in his left hand, grabbed the saddle horn with his right. Then he eased his foot into the stirrup and, smooth as a trout leaping a falls, went into the saddle.

Dynamite exploded. Brady knew instantly that the horse had been appropriately named. He seemed to fly into a million pieces that left nothing but a saddle to ride. A saddle that was caught by first one, then another, of the leaping, flying, twisting fragments of what had been a horse. A lone saddle, falling, shooting sideways, rolling, changing direction and shape with the speed of a comet. Ground and corrals became a blur, then blotted out altogether. The world held nothing but himself and the terrifically jolting saddle that pounded him almost into insensibility.

It was uncanny the way those pieces of horse flew apart, or came together with that peculiar twist and horrible jolt which centered in the small of the back, each impact seeming powerful enough to catapult the rider into the next county.

Brady knew the roan was a long-winded bucker—just how long, no one had ever stayed with him to find out. The cowboy had previously made up his mind to attempt no grandstand ride. There was too much at stake. He did not fan the bucker with quirt or spur beyond the natural strokes that would help keep his balance with the momentum of that whirling, slamming ball of lightning.

Dynamite was a glutton for endurance. After his first cyclonic round he slowed down to straight pitching a few seconds. This all but cost Brady his seat, for he relaxed a trifle. Then the roan turned on his second tornado of hell and brimstone. This was a more ferocious effort than the first and Brady knew he was up against the ride of his life. Shouts came dimly to his ears. His brain seemed pounded to numbness. Then a certain girlish voice penetrated his dulled mind, clear as the tone of a violin.

"Take it out of him, Brady! Show 'em, cowboy! Show 'em!"

There was no mistaking that voice, its vibrating eagerness. His vision cleared. His muscles caught the flying pieces, were able to hold them together. A lot of electricity was disappearing from the jolts. Dynamite was actually

slowing down. He broke into a bucking run, circled the corral a few more times, then stopped short, planting his forefeet stiffly. His sides worked like a bellows.

Brady looked up. Warner sat on the top rail of the corral a few feet distant.

"Did I ride him slick?"

"You sure did," the old cowman agreed readily. "And what's more, you put up the best ride I ever saw. Get down—you've earned your money all right."

Brady stepped off, removed saddle and hackamore from the panting roan, and carried them through the gate to his own horse. He had a passing glimpse of the Cross Bar foreman far away on the fringe of the crowd. But just then he felt little interest in Jordan Gates. Doreen Landis still stood in the wagon and for a second Brady Wilson gazed straight into her eyes, then he was surrounded by the jubilant Double O cowboys.

He didn't mind cooking supper for the outfit, that night. The afternoon's performance had removed all stigma from his present position. But he found that he was still seized with confusion when he imagined himself approaching Doreen.

"Doggone it!" he assured himself. "She was cheering me on—she wanted me to win—and I ain't going to be afraid of her any more! I don't hafta run and hide like a permanent sourdough mixer!"

But it took more courage to cross the yard, about dusk, when Doreen appeared in the kitchen door, than it had taken to put his saddle on Dynamite that afternoon. To his surprise she displayed signs of confusion when he drew near. And that added to his own courage.

"That was a fine ride you made," she said hurriedly.

"Thanks," he replied, hoping she could not hear the pounding of his heart. "That's my business—ridin' and punchin' cows—and I'm going to stick to it when I finish my month out there." He gave a quick nod towards the cook house.

"Oh, I should think you would," Doreen exclaimed, recovering something of her customary poise. "I couldn't imagine why you wanted to cook!"

"W-wanted to?" Brady stammered, reddening. "I didn't—I hated it! But I had to get a job around here, and that was the only one."

"Oh, how funny!" she said, the elusive smile curving her lips.

"I had to stay around here, because I saw you that morning in town. And there wasn't no going away after I looked at you once!"

Suddenly Doreen retreated a few steps. "What a nice compliment!" she remarked in attempted lightness. "Won't you come in?"

Brady started to cross the threshold, then halted. He extended a hand to grasp one of hers. "No—I don't want to talk to you in any kitchen. Come out under the stars."

"But I don't want—"

"Yes, you do," Brady insisted, the expression in her eyes adding to his courage. "You do want to listen to me." He drew her gently forward. "I heard you cheering me this afternoon. When a girl cheers a hombre that way, don't she like him a little bit?"

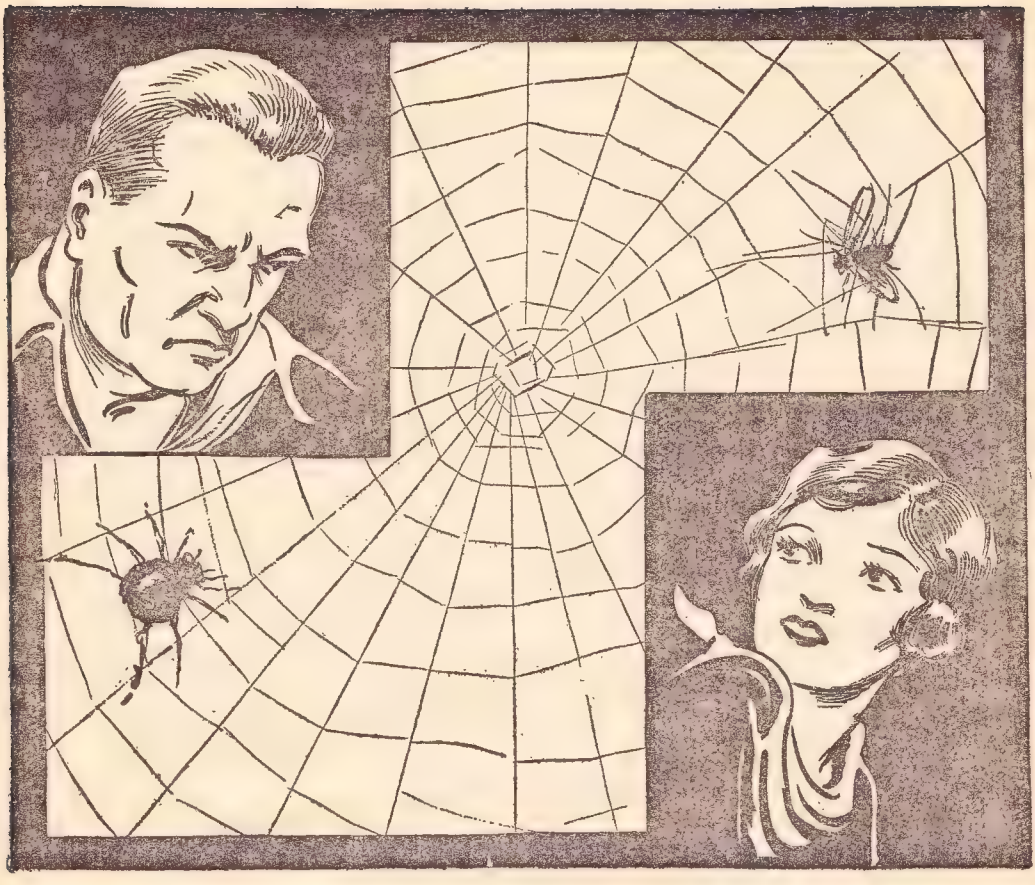
"Of course," Doreen agreed readily, making an attempt to release her hand.

But Brady led her gently across the yard to the shadow of a box alder.

"We were awfully proud to have someone on the Double O ride Dynamite," she went on in rather a hurried tone. "And Uncle Jude—"

"Mi-gosh!" Brady gasped. "Never mind Dynamite, and Uncle Jude! I can't wait any longer to tell you—" The last words were inaudible because they were spoken against her lips.

And he didn't care if she did know how his heart was pounding—hers was doing the very same thing.



Fire Frenzy

A ROMANTIC SERIAL

By Marie de Nervaud

PART TWO

SYNOPSIS

KAY CRANDON, owner of the Lazy Nine.
TED GAYNOR, who has lost his property through financial reverses.
JOSH HASTINGS, boss of the Flying Six.
SETH WATSON, Kay's foreman.
SCRAP JOHNSON, one of Hastings' punchers.
TOM RUNYON, the fire patrol.

While riding out on the range, Kay Crandon encounters a man preparing to set a forest fire. She soon learns that he is Ted Gaynor, who has become desperate in his attempt to support his mother and sister, so has resorted to this means to create a job for himself as a fire-fighter. The girl believes the man is straight, therefore she offers him a job on the Lazy Nine and a cabin dwelling for his family.

Presently Tom Runyon sees the brush stacked up nearby; but Kay manages to clear Ted and herself of suspicion. When the girl starts homeward she discovers smoke coming from the ranch buildings. Her place is on fire, and upon her arrival she sees that nothing remains but the bunkhouse and a few cabins. Fortunately, Seth Watson has been able to save a desk containing the ranch records and insurance papers. Thereupon Josh Hastings of the Flying Six offers his hospitality to the Crandons. Kay refuses to accept it, but her Aunt Kate and her sister, Babs, take advantage of his offer.

The next morning Kay and Ted ride to

Red River, where Kay learns from the banker that the insurance money must be used to pay off the mortgage. He tells her that Josh Hastings is willing to take over the remaining mortgage and pay her five thousand dollars cash. Kay denounces Hastings, stating that he wants her land, and insinuating that he is the incendiary. Meanwhile, unknown to Kay, Ted quarrels with Scrap Johnson in Kelly's Saloon when the Flying Six puncher makes scathing remarks about Kay. In the ensuing fray Ted threatens to kill Johnson.

When Kay relates her experience, Ted suggests that her punchers rebuild the ranch and start anew. The loyal riders fall in with this plan and agree to work without salary until the ranch is on a paying basis again.

Kay decides to ride to the Flying Six to recount the news to her aunt and sister. When she leaves to see about purchasing some timberland in order to have sufficient lumber for the building, she is waylaid on the trail by Scrap Johnson, who is obviously on the same errand in behalf of Hastings. After pinioning her wrists and ankles, and putting a gag in her mouth, he leaves her and rides away.

CHAPTER XII

A Successful Bargain

TED GAYNOR paused as he was saddling his horse to start on the long ride back to his home, to arrange for moving his mother and sister to their new quarters. He glanced down toward Kay's cabin, and obeying a sudden impulse, left his horse and walked quickly down to the tiny log house.

The door was locked, so he knocked vigorously. Since he received no response, he turned away and made for the bunkhouse on the run. Springing up the steps, he nearly collided with Seth, as he pushed in the door and met him on his way out.

"Hullo!" Seth exclaimed in surprise. "I thought you were on your way long ago!"

"Something's got me worried," Ted explained. "I tried to find Kay, but she's off somewhere."

"I saw her start out on Flicker about a half hour ago," Seth answered. "What's on your mind?"

"I don't think she ought to let any grass grow under her feet before nailing that option," Ted declared. "As far as I can see, that's the only available timber there is, and we ought to make sure there's no slip-up."

"Hell's bells, there can't be any slip-up," Seth ejaculated. "Why, Old Man Warren'll be tickled pink to get rid of it!"

"Just the same, I'd be a lot easier to know that it was all sewed up." Ted looked from Seth to two of the boys who had come up, and were listening in. "Have any of you fellows got any cash?"

"Sure," Seth answered. "Why?"

"Because if we can scrape up twenty-five dollars or so, I'll go in and make a first payment on the option in Kay's name, so there can't be any chance of her losing it."

"I can't see as there's all that rush about it," Seth observed. "Still and all, there's no harm in getting that out of the way. It would be kind of a nice surprise for Kay to find it all attended to." He pulled out a roll of bills and counted off seventeen dollars. "How about chipping in?"

He cocked an eye at the other two, who readily complied, and between them, they made up a pool of twenty-five dollars.

"Go to it, son, if you've got a hunch that way." Seth handed Ted the money. "Bring the option back and we'll give it to Kay this evening."

"I'll do that," Ted promised, putting the wad of bills in his pocket. "I'll start off for home after supper."

On the way in to Red River over the same route that Kay and he had taken that morning, Ted's thoughts of Kay were so absorbing that the time passed almost as quickly as it had in her actual company. It seemed impossible that he had known the girl only about twenty-four hours! The dramatic events that had followed in such rapid succession after their fateful meeting might have filled a year instead of a day, so completely had he changed in the interval.

Because of that meeting, which might have had such a different ending if anyone but Kay, with her deep instinctive

understanding of human nature, had found him at that act of desperation, his whole outlook on life was changed. Just the relief of knowing that his mother and sister had a home to come to was enough to make a new man of him. But added to that the thought that he was to be near Kay, helping her and planning for her, opened up untold vistas of hopes that were too magic to be indulged in.

Ted found Old Man Warren's shack without any trouble. He knocked on the door, which was pulled open after a minute or two, and he found himself facing the grizzled old prospector, who eyed him with suspicious surprise.

"What do you want?" he demanded inhospitably.

"I wanted to see you about buying some of that timberland that you hold on the south ridge of the Bitter Root," Ted answered, having all he could do to keep from laughing aloud at the comical change that came over Old Man Warren's fierce expression.

"What's that?" he asked, his face screwed up and his eyes squinted as though he doubted the evidence of his senses. "What'd you say?"

Ted repeated the purpose of his visit.

"Gosh Halifax Almighty!" His host opened the door wide and, pulling Ted in, hastily closed it behind him. "I sure never thought I'd live to hear that! You got any real money?" He blinked suspiciously at his visitor.

"I've twenty-five dollars to say I'm in earnest," Ted answered. "I'm offering you a hundred dollars for ten acres and an option on another ten at the same price. And I'm ready to pay that twenty-five right now on deposit."

"Say, young fella, what's your game?" Old Man Warren demanded. "You been prospectin' up there?"

Ted laughed. "No; that's out of my line. I don't want it for myself," he added frankly. "I'm buying it for Kay Crandon."

Old Man Warren's suspicious little eyes screwed up still more. "What's she after? Started already to have a fling with her insurance money?"

"Maybe." Ted gladly let his host put his own interpretation on Kay's purpose. The less he guessed Kay's vital need for the property the better.

"Well, if she wants it that bad, strikes me she'll pay more, now that she's got all that money to sling around," the old prospector announced with cunning. "You tell her I ain't selling for a mite less than twenty dollars an acre."

Ted turned carelessly toward the door. "No point telling her that," he observed. "There's plenty of timberland to be bought at ten dollars an acre and even less. I'll just pick it up somewhere else without bothering you any more. Kay thought you'd like to sell and told me to give you the first chance." He pulled open the door. "So long."

"Hi, there! Wait a minute! You don't need to be in such a doggone rush! I didn't say I wouldn't sell, did I?" Old Man Warren pulled him back. "Have it your own way," he capitulated. Then he added greedily, "where's that twenty-five bucks?"

"We'll get this down in black and white first." Ted sat down at the rough pine board table and drew up a memorandum of the transaction, which Old Man Warren signed.

"Here you are," Ted said, handing him the money. He put the precious memorandum in his pocket, smiling as he watched his host count the twenty-five dollars with loving care. "You're well rid of it," he observed, as he turned to the door again. "Buyers aren't any too plentiful these days."

Old Man Warren nodded impatiently, but made no response as he started to count his unexpected wealth again. With a "So long" that this time was accepted, Ted went out and mounted his horse, well satisfied with his afternoon's work.

Going back at a more leisurely pace, he was about five miles west of Red River when he noticed, far off in the

distance, a dark object that looked like someone on foot. After he reined in, he scanned the horizon to confirm his impression, but he could see nothing. Telling himself that he was a victim of an optical illusion, he dismissed the incident from his mind and pushed on to the Lazy Nine.

On arriving at the bunkhouse, he found it deserted. While he stood for a moment on the steps he turned over in his mind the question of waiting until someone came in off the range to deliver the document to Kay for him, or of just leaving it with a note for Seth.

It was a great temptation to wait until Kay came back and give it to her himself. He could just see her eyes sparkle, and her nose crinkle up with amusement, when she heard of Old Man Warren's attempt at bargaining. On the other hand, he ought to be starting for home as soon as possible. As it was, he'd have to ride all night before he arrived there.

Debating this point in his mind, he suddenly heard pounding hoofbeats, and the next minute Flicker came in sight, riderless, with his reins dragging and his ears back as he headed on a dead run for the corral. With a fearful certainty that something had happened to Kay, Ted leaped down the bunkhouse steps and threw himself into the saddle of his waiting mount, everything forgotten but Kay's safety.

A sudden flash of memory brought to mind that impression he had had of having seen someone on foot far to the north of him as he rode out from Red River. Was it possible that Kay had had the same hunch as his about the wisdom of seeing about the option at once, and that she had ridden in to Red River? And had some accident happened on the way?

Cursing himself for not having investigated then and there, Ted headed off at a hard gallop in the general direction of the place where he had thought he had seen that figure for a fleeting moment.

CHAPTER XIII

Rescue

LEFT to herself, Kay sank back and gave way for a moment to the weak, dizzy feeling that closed over her. Through her half-conscious state she could hear the retreating hoofbeats of Scrap Johnson's horse grow dimmer and dimmer in the distance. Finally they died away, and the unbroken stillness of the mesa deepened around her and seemed to be dragging her into its own oblivion.

Fighting down the temptation to let go and sink back into it, Kay struggled into a sitting position and forced herself to take stock of her desperate situation. Her jaws ached cruelly under the tightly tied bandanna, and her legs and arms were unbearably cramped from their forced confinement. But bad as the physical pain and discomfort were, her mental anguish was far worse.

She hadn't a doubt but that all her plans for rebuilding had come to nothing; and worse than that, it was practically a foregone conclusion that Josh Hastings would eventually get the ranch. For the first time Kay admitted to herself that he was too powerful and unscrupulous for her to fight him successfully. But even though her mind recognized this fact, she found that hope still persisted.

As she desperately analyzed that hope, she realized that it centered around Ted Gaynor. Somehow or other, he might get around this last blow that she had so stupidly brought on herself.

Despite her effort to thrust the thought of Scrap Johnson into the background of her mind and to cling to the conviction that he wouldn't dare to do her any actual harm, a shudder ran over Kay at the thought of his return. He had all the instincts of a bully, and he had shown himself capable of sickening revenge for the wounds she had inflicted on his vanity.

Her lips burned at the memory of his kiss, and panic seized her as she realized how powerless she was in his hands.

Even if he didn't do her any actual harm, she would never get over the indignity that he had imposed upon her. She was galvanized to action by this desperate thought; the ranch and everything else were forgotten in the surge of self-preservation that swept over her. Kay rolled over and struggled up to her knees.

The incline of the coulee behind her shut her off from a view of the range and ruined any chance of her discovery by any passer-by. Not that there was likely to be anyone, but it was a hundred to one chance. Some way or other she must get up there, and her courage revived with the prospect of an immediate objective to be obtained. Kay gazed piercingly about for some sharp stone on which she might saw through her bonds.

Nothing was to be seen but small stones and pebbles scattered through the bunch grass of the mesa, and Kay's heart sank as this first hope proved vain. Resolving to get up in the open, bonds or no bonds, Kay managed to edge painfully up the slope by using her elbows and knees to pull herself along.

The distance, which could have been covered by a few strides on foot, seemed endless when negotiated in this painful fashion, but at last she reached the top and sank back faint with exhaustion. Opening her eyes, she could see the range stretching out in its undulating waves to the horizon on the south and east, while to the north and west the mountains rose to intercept its vast space.

There was not a sign of life in all the endless expanse. In a kind of stupor, Kay watched the flickering waves of heat that made the air seem to vibrate against the blue sky. A merciful oblivion was stealing over her, when suddenly against the sky, on the horizon to the south, she saw outlined the silhouette of a horseman.

The first sickening dread that it might be Scrap Johnson was superseded by the realization that he wouldn't be riding so far to the south. Resolving that whoever the rider was, she would rather trust herself to him than to Scrap Johnson, Kay took fresh courage.

Strengthened by new hope, she struggled to her knees, gazing desperately at the distant apparition. Unless she could stand up, there wasn't a chance that he could see her. Kay edged her way over to a smooth boulder at some little distance from her; then, by bracing herself against it, she managed to pull herself up on her feet. As she wavered uncertainly on the one foot that was in a position to take a solid stand on the ground, her heart gave a great leap, and a strangled cry beat against the muffling bandanna.

She watched the horseman come to a standstill, and although he was only a speck in the distance, Kay was convinced that he was gazing her way. In an instinctive impulsive effort to jerk her arms up and signal to him, she lost her balance and sank back to the ground. Straining and panting, she tried again to get up, her eyes never leaving the silhouetted figure.

With a groan of desperation, she saw him resume his way. After his disappearance her courage forsook her, and she gave way to the rushing blackness that enveloped her.

"Sleeping beauty, eh?"

Kay came to, to realize that Scrap Johnson was standing over her. She kept her eyes closed, as she summoned all her courage to meet the ordeal ahead. If she kept her wits about her there might yet be some way out. There must be some decency in the man she could appeal to! But she musn't show any fear!

He gave a low whistle. "I'll say you've done some traveling!" he observed. "Kind of hard going, what?"

He stooped down and loosened her gag. "No point in covering up those red lips any longer," he laughed mockingly, as he straightened up again. "Come on, cutie; I know you're shamming! Open up those brown eyes of yours! I like to see 'em snap!"

Kay opened her eyes and looked

straight at him, without moving. All her will-power was shining in their hypnotic depths, and in spite of himself Scrap Johnson gave an embarrassed laugh and took a backward step.

"If you'll cut these bonds and ride away from here"—Kay's voice was low and intent, as she held him with her gaze—"I'll agree to keep still about what's happened. That's your only chance to stay on this range and live."

For a moment he wavered; then, with a hoarse laugh, he stooped down beside her and put his arm around her.

"A bird in the hand's worth two in the bush," he gloated, breathing heavily. His eyes avoided hers and focused on her lips, and Kay felt a sick rush of terror.

In their absorption, neither had heard the thud of distant hoofbeats, but now they both became aware of them. Dropping Kay with an oath, Scrap Johnson sprang to his feet and seized his gun. In the same instant Kay kicked out fiercely against his shins, her bound feet catching him unawares and throwing him off his balance. He crashed to the ground, his gun exploding harmlessly in the air.

Through the waves of blackness that assailed her, Kay heard the pounding of hoofs and Ted Gaynor's voice calling, "Lie still! If you move, you're a goner!"

Galvanized to life again by the miracle of hearing Ted's voice, Kay shrank away from the prone figure at her feet, that suddenly ceased struggling at the deadly threat behind Ted's command. With her heart in her throat, she turned and gazed at the oncoming figure of her rescuer.

CHAPTER XIV

An Ultimatum

TAKING in the situation at a glance, Ted pulled his mount to a sliding stop and slipped off, his eyes fixed on Scrap Johnson, whom he held covered with the gun Kay had given him. A foot or two away from him, Scrap Johnson's gun lay where it had fallen, just out of reach, but dangerously near.

Ted shifted his aim for one fraction of a second from Scrap Johnson and sent a shot that shattered the gun to bits; then he covered the man on the ground again, before he had a chance to move.

"Get out of his reach, Kay," Ted called, without once taking his eyes off his victim. "I don't aim to have him try to use you as a shield!"

Without a word Kay obeyed, dragging herself well out of reach of Scrap Johnson, in case he should try any such desperate maneuver.

"Now, get up, you!"

It seemed to Kay that she had never heard such controlled fury in any human voice. After a moment's hesitation, the Flying Six puncher rose to his feet.

"Pitch 'em, and keep 'em there!"

With a snarl he obeyed, and Kay glanced fearfully from one man to the other. What was to be the outcome of this encounter?

"Turn around!" Ted's voice rang out again, and, as his prisoner obeyed, he reached with his free hand for the rope on the pommel of his saddle.

Stepping swiftly over to Scrap Johnson, Ted pressed his gun into his back, at the same time putting a loop around his raised hands. After he had jerked them down, he expertly trussed Johnson's arms to his sides, then tripped him, and finished the job of hogtying him. Ted left him where he had dropped and strode over to Kay. With quick, clean cuts of his knife, he severed the ropes that bound her.

"Are you all right?" His breath came quickly, as he gazed with desperate anxiety into Kay's eyes.

She nodded, a tremulous, reassuring smile on her lips. "Yes, thanks to you."

Ted handed her her father's gun that she had given him.

"Take this, and if anything happens to me, you can protect yourself. But nothing will happen." His voice still vibrated with the same deadly fury.

"What are you going to do?" Kay demanded.

"Much as I'd like to, I can't kill this cowardly coyote in cold blood, if he hasn't harmed you; and I'm not going to drag him to the sheriff to have this noised about the range. So I'm going to give him a second lesson he won't forget; and if he ever shows up on the range again, I will kill him!"

"No—no!" Kay cried in a terror-stricken voice. "Leave him bound and let's go!"

Without appearing to hear her, Ted stepped swiftly away and called contemptuously to Scrap Johnson.

"That's only a slip noose; get yourself free and come and take your lesson."

A look of mingled surprise and elation gleamed in Scrap Johnson's eyes as he strained against the ropes and felt them give. Shaking himself loose, he crouched for a moment, then made a rush for Ted, all the fury of his former defeat in the attack he launched at him.

It seemed to Kay that it was hours instead of seconds that, with her heart in her mouth, she watched the struggle between the two men. Both were slight in build, though Scrap Johnson had a decided advantage in weight and general physical fitness. The outraged fury at the indignity that had been put on Kay, however, added an invincible fury to Ted's attack, that far outweighed any mere physical advantage of the other.

Sidestepping his opponent's fist-swinging rush, Ted came back at him with a blow that sent him staggering backwards. When Johnson recovered his balance, he lowered his head with a roar of rage and butted it into Ted's stomach like a battering ram. But Ted countered with a swinging uppercut that found its mark, in spite of the painful contraction of his muscles at the foul blow.

Ted followed up his advantage like one possessed, as he landed one punishing blow after another, finally forcing his antagonist to his knees. Panting and blinking the sweat out of his eyes, he drew back, and as Scrap Johnson struggled to his feet and lunged for him, Ted planted a knockout blow on the man's chin that snapped his head back with a sickening twist. With a groan he toppled to the ground and lay still.

Kay let out a long quivering breath, as Ted stood panting for a moment; then he walked over to her and took back the gun from her trembling hand.

"It'll be some time before he comes to." In spite of his effort to steady it, his voice showed the effect of the emotional and physical ordeal he had just been through. "The sooner we get off the better. Unless I miss my guess, he'll vamoose from this range without too much boasting about this afternoon's doings."

He slipped the gun in his holster and stepped over to Scrap Johnson's horse, which was patiently waiting at some distance from the late fray, his reins over his neck. Picking up the reins, Ted hung them over the pommel of the saddle, then, giving him a sharp blow on the flank, he stampeded him off across the mesa.

"That bird can walk; it will do him good and work out his stiffness," he observed grimly, glancing at the unconscious figure on the ground as he came back to Kay. "How about our getting under way?"

"Ted — wait!" Kay's eyes were enormous with the force of an idea that she was struggling with. "That man has the option on our timberland, right there in his pocket!"

Ted stared at her in bewilderment. Was her mind giving under the strain?

"No, he hasn't, Kay," he soothed, as he led his horse over to her. "I'll tell you about that on the way home."

"But he has!" Kay declared passionately, gazing with a fascinated horror at the inert figure stretched on the mesa. "He got it by trickery, and if you won't take it way from him, I'm going to!"

"Wait a minute!" Ted seized both her hands in one of his, as he fumbled with the other for a paper in his pocket.

"No need for you to rifle his pockets," he added, flourishing it triumphantly before her.

With amazement, Kay ran her eyes over the memorandum of Ted's transaction with Old Man Warren, with the prospector's name signed at the bottom.

"Ted! You mean you beat him to it?" Her eyes sparkled with excitement, and the color flooded her cheeks at this further evidence of Ted's thought for her.

In a few words, he told her about Seth and the boys chipping in to raise enough to bind the purchase, and about his visit to Old Man Warren.

"I don't know anything about beating this guy to it," he added, feasting his eyes on her happy excitement as she folded the precious paper and put it in her pocket. "You'll have to tell me that part of it! Come on!"

A swift, strong vibration ran all through him at the thought of holding Kay in his arms as they rode back to the ranch. Mounting, he reached down his hand and she sprang lightly up before him, her own heightened color attesting to the fact that his emotion had communicated itself to her.

For a long time they rode in silence across the mesa that was beginning to take on the more intense colors and the lengthened shadows of late afternoon. Kay leaned confidingly against Ted, and his arm involuntarily tightened around her. Somehow there seemed to be no need for words, and sweet as the gay companionship of the morning's ride had been, this silent communion meant infinitely more.

The sunset colors were flooding the sky as they neared the ranch house gate.

Abruptly Ted reined in. "I'd like to say good-by to you here; I must be on my way." He hardly recognized his low, husky voice. A wild longing to kiss Kay before he released her swept over him, but even as he struggled with it, Kay slipped from his arm and sprang lightly to the ground.

"When will you be back?" Kay's voice was as low and vibrant with suppressed feeling as his.

"Three days at the most," he answered. For a long moment he gazed at her. He started to say something, then changed his mind and picked up the reins.

"Good-by." He wheeled abruptly, and Kay watched him ride into the sunset. A strange premonition suddenly tightened her throat. Would he really be back in three days? Already, their whole tense and dramatic encounter seemed like a dream.

Turning swiftly, she walked past the charred ruins of the ranch house and down to her cabin, skirting the bunkhouse in a desire to be alone for a few minutes, before accounting for her absence to the boys.

CHAPTER XV

An Unexpected Visitor

ABSORBED in her thoughts, Kay walked swiftly down to the cabin, her eyes absently-mindedly fixed on the browning bunch grass at her feet.

"Hullo! There you are!"

A hearty voice startled her out of her reverie. As she glanced up, she saw the tall figure of a man waiting for her on the cabin steps. Reluctantly relinquishing her hope for solitude, she hurried forward, and recognized Tom Runyon as the waiting figure.

"Say! I couldn't wait any longer to come over and tell you how bad I feel about all this!" He waved toward the ruins of the ranch house as he came down the steps to meet her. His eyes, as they rested on her brilliant coloring and the flush still in her cheeks from the ride with Ted, expressed the same admiration they had on the ridge. "I had to stick around up yonder until I was relieved," he explained, "or I'd have been over sooner."

"That's very good of you." Kay slipped her hand out of his grasp. "I certainly didn't think, when I talked to you last, that I'd find my own house burnt down!"

"I kind of thought I might be some help," Tom Runyon boomed pompously. "I've been talking with that foreman of yours up at the bunkhouse, and it looks mighty peculiar to me, how this fire started."

Kay shot him a startled look. "You mean you think—"

"I'm not thinking anything," he hastened to say, with a cautious lowering of his voice. "I'm only saying that this and any other fire will bear investigating."

Kay felt all her first suspicions revive, but she remembered Dan Steele's warning and held her peace. While this Tom Runyon seemed all right, and a kindly and genial enough person, she didn't really know anything about him, so it would pay to go slow.

If, on the other hand, he wanted to go ahead investigating on his own initiative, he might unearth something that would give some foundation for her suspicion of Josh Hastings. But while she must be very careful not to voice the direction in which her suspicions lay, there was one point on which she must set him straight right away.

"I am absolutely certain that Seth and our outfit are above suspicion," she stated positively, "so if you're looking for foul play, you can count them out from the start."

"Maybe," he nodded his approval of her loyalty. "But when you're starting out to look for clues you can't be handicapped by any foregone conclusions. You just leave the investigating to me," he added tolerantly. "All I want you to do is to answer a few questions."

"Gladly; but let's wait until after supper." Kay leaned against the side of the cabin for a second, overcome by a sudden weary faintness.

Tom Runyon sprang to put a steadying hand on her arm. "What's the matter?" he inquired anxiously. "You look all in!"

"Nothing." Kay straightened up and smiled at him. "I'm just a little tired, I guess. I'll be all right as soon as I get something to eat. You go on up to the bunkhouse and I'll join you in a minute. I'm eating with the boys, until I can get my own housekeeping arrangements rigged up. You'll stay for supper, of course?" she added, as he hesitated a moment.

"That's mighty good of you; I'd be glad to. Only, look here! Who was that you were riding in with?"

Kay paused at the cabin door, her eyebrows raised in surprise. A slight flush came into her cheeks as she answered his question. After all, there was no point in making a mystery about being with Ted.

"That was Ted Gaynor, the man I was with up on the ridge," she answered. To her annoyance, she flushed still more, as she caught Tom Runyon's keen, speculative look at her heightened color.

"Oh, yes; well, he's just the one I wanted to ask you about. But we'll wait until after supper."

Before Kay could answer, he turned and made for the bunkhouse.

As Kay washed her face and hands, she tried to reason herself out of the queer, panicky feeling that suddenly took possession of her. The dark premonition that she had had when she said good-by to Ted swept over her again.

"Don't be a fool!" she scolded her image in the mirror as she ruthlessly tugged a comb through her tangled curls. "You're just letting your nerves run away with you! What could possibly happen to him? You must keep your head, and don't let Tom Runyon's first suspicions start up again!"

Braced up by the thought that it was up to her to protect Ted, Kay walked slowly up to the bunkhouse, planning in her mind just what she was going to say. Any thoughts were welcome, as long as they pushed into the background her horrible experience of the afternoon. Instead of allowing herself to dwell on that, she concentrated on the memory of the magnificent way Ted had come to the rescue.

If her first intuitive judgment of him, in spite of the damning conditions of

their first meeting, had needed any bolstering up, she certainly had had it there.

From the minute he had been freed from the desperate need of providing for his mother and sister, Ted had been a changed man. Kay thought back to what he had said in that first dramatic moment, when she had held him covered with her gun. With her intuitive sympathy, she understood exactly how desperation for those he loved had driven him to feel justified in destroying some timber for the sake of saving human lives.

Even in his desperation, he had thought it all out with the same intelligent conciseness that he had used in planning a way out for her and following up by saving the timberland that she had so nearly lost by her own folly. He had been perfectly right in saying that in burning off the ridge he had chosen he would have done no actual damage to anyone. It would have destroyed a second scrub growth of timber, but it could easily have been kept under control.

You couldn't expect any man to see it as she did, though, Kay realized, as she neared the bunkhouse and saw Tom Runyon standing talking with Seth while they waited for the call to supper. Especially not a man of Tom Runyon's type, who was obsessed with the idea of his own importance, and would be ready to jump to any conclusion that would reflect glory on himself.

And the demand of the community for some action in running down the firebug, whoever he was, would make Runyon all the more eager to pin the blame for all the fires on Ted, if he suspected that one mad act of his, from the consequences of which, thank goodness, she had arrived in time to save him.

The supper bell rang just as Kay joined the two men, and in the general conversation at the table, there was no chance for Runyon to ask her the questions she was prepared to parry as skilfully as she could. Talk turned on the new scheme for building the ranch house, and everyone was full of ideas and suggestions.

"By the way," Seth broke in suddenly, "isn't it about time Ted Gaynor was getting back?"

"Oh, I meant to tell you, and I forgot!" Kay felt Tom Runyon's eyes on her as she turned apologetically to Seth. "I—I met him on the mesa, and he gave me the option he got from Old Man Warren. It was terribly good of you and the boys to lend that money, so he could clinch the bargain."

She smiled at them, a sudden catch in her throat and mist in her eyes at this proof of their loyalty to her.

"Why didn't he come in?" Seth demanded. "I wanted to get all the dope."

"He thought he'd better be getting on." Again Kay felt the slow color come into her cheeks, at the insistence of Tom Runyon's look. "He told me to tell you all about it." She launched into the account Ted had given her of his interview with Old Man Warren, in the hopes of diverting attention from herself.

"I like that Gaynor fellow," Seth observed when she had finished. "Just where did you say you picked him up?"

Kay gave a gasp at this break. It was evident that Seth had forgotten all the things she had told him to say to Tom Runyon about Ted, and he couldn't have put his foot in it any worse if he had deliberately tried, than by this question. She could see Tom Runyon's ears pricked up to catch her answer, although he pretended to be engrossed in conversation with one of the boys.

Managing to change her gasp into a cough, Kay fixed her eyes firmly on Seth as she answered. "Why, I've told you about him before, Seth! You don't pay attention to what I say half the time!" Under her teasing tone, her voice held a significant reminder. "He's the one who has been helping me decide on some of the timberland I've been wanting to buy, even before the house burned down."

She turned to Tom Runyon with a

politely explanatory air, as she said, "I've been thinking we ought to add some more timberland to the ranch."

"There's nothing much but scrub growth on that ridge where I met you," he observed.

"That's just the conclusion Ted arrived at." Kay looked up at Tom Runyon with flattering admiration. "I'm sorry he isn't here; you and he would enjoy talking together."

"Where's he gone?"

"Just yesterday, he decided to really join up with the outfit," Kay explained, "and he's gone back to bring his mother and sister to the other little cabin like mine."

"I see." Tom Runyon's looks belied his words, Kay realized nervously, as his black eyes fastened themselves speculatively on her.

"He's the one who has got us started with this idea of building the ranch house and barn ourselves," she rattled on, "so it's lucky he is a regular member of the outfit now."

"Sure is," Seth agreed heartily, pushing back his chair and rising to his feet. "We'll need all the hands we can get on this job."

There was a rattle and creaking of chairs as the others followed suit.

"How about taking me on?" Tom Runyon suggested, with a flattering eye bent on Kay.

"You're too valuable right where you are," she countered gayly. "I'm counting on you to keep my new timberland from burning down."

"That's right." Tom Runyon promptly succumbed to Kay's flattery, and with a relieved feeling that she had safely steered him away from the dangerous interest he was manifesting in Ted, Kay sauntered out into the twilight with him.

Her relief, however, was short-lived. No sooner had they stepped out of the mess shack than Tom Runyon took possessive hold of her arm, saying:

"How about that little talk we were going to have?"

"All right," said Kay resignedly, as she allowed herself to be guided down to the cabin.

CHAPTER XVI

Strange News

MARSHALING her wits to meet the coming interview, Kay walked the short distance from the bunkhouse to the cabin in silence. She felt that she would give anything to be rid of Tom Runyon, and have a chance to rest after her momentous and exhausting day; but some instinct warned her that it would be foolish to let him go away with the suspicion that she could see he still harbored against Ted. Tired as she was, she would have to change his line of thought, or he might make trouble.

"Shall we sit out here?" Kay sank down on the top step, and leaned back against the post that held the rail of the tiny porch in place.

"Sure."

Kay couldn't quite read the look in Tom Runyon's dark eyes as he gazed at her. Her thoughts suddenly flew to those luminous black eyes of Ted's, so different from the ones bent on her now. Ted's eyes had a light that seemed to come from within, while Tom's were just black and round and staring, but no whit less intent.

"You make some picture there, do you know it?" said Tom fervently.

Kay smiled a faint response to his admiration.

"I don't feel much like a picture," she admitted. "I'm terribly tired."

"I'll bet you are." He put one foot on the lower step and leaned toward her, his elbow resting on his knee. "I'm not going to keep you, but I just want to get one or two things straightened out in my mind. Just how long have you known this Ted Gaynor?"

"Goodness! I never can remember dates, but it seems as though I'd known him for ages. On the other hand, I feel as though I'd known you quite a long time, and we met only yesterday." Kay glanced up at him from under her

dark lashes with deliberate coquetry.

"I certainly feel that way about you!" Tom Runyon gave a flattered laugh, adding, "Say, what is it about you that keeps a fellow looking at you, and forgetting what he wants to say?"

Kay laughed. "Why say anything?" she asked demurely. "It's too lovely here in the twilight to be asking questions. I know what I would like to have you tell me, though," she added, as an afterthought.

"What?" He was all eager attention.

"Tell me something about your work as fire patrol. Have you done it before you came here?"

"Sure I have." He cleared his throat with a pleased air of superiority. "That's why the Protective Association sent for me to come up here and see if I couldn't get to the bottom of these mysterious fires. I've been handling a situation a whole lot like this in Wyoming, and believe me, I ran that firebug to earth!"

"Tell me about it." Kay fixed him with her eyes full of a flattering inquiry.

"Well, it was this way." Tom Runyon settled back, and Kay was just breathing a sigh of relief at having successfully side-tracked him from the subject of Ted Gaynor, when he leaned forward once more and broke in abruptly on his narrative.

"Before I get going on that, I want to clear up my mind about this Gaynor guy." He looked keenly at Kay. "Did he tell you about the fight he had today?"

Kay looked at him with startled eyes. How could Tom Runyon possibly have found out about the fight on the mesa?

"Fight?" she echoed in a faint tone.

"So he didn't tell you!" Tom exclaimed. "I had a hunch he wouldn't!"

Kay looked at him with startled eyes. amazement. What under the sun was he driving at? If Tom Runyon knew about the fight at all, he must know that she had been there and had seen the whole thing. But there was no possible way for him to know. He had come to the ranch from the opposite direction, so he couldn't have come across Scrap Johnson when the puncher came to, and have heard about it from him.

"I don't understand what you're talking about," Kay said finally. "Are you sure he was in a fight?"

"Sure as shooting," Tom Runyon assured her. "The guy that came out to relieve me saw the whole thing."

"But he couldn't have!" Kay burst out, then hastily tried to cover up her break. "I mean, he must be mixing Ted up with someone else."

"Not on your life he wasn't," Tom declared positively. "He was right there in Kelly's joint when it happened."

"Kelly's joint!" Kay echoed in a relieved tone as a light suddenly burst on her. "Oh, that wasn't Ted! He was waiting for me outside the bank, and I remember now he did say something about having seen a fracas of some kind down at Kelly's."

"Seen it!" Tom scoffed. "I'll say he saw it! He was the one who started it!"

"But—how—why—" Kay bit her lip and broke off short. The last thing she wanted to do was to discuss Ted, and she still felt sure that Tom Runyon was mistaken.

"That's just what I mean." Tom leaned forward and shook his finger impressively at her. "There's a lot you don't know about that Gaynor guy." Tom Runyon was so positive that Kay felt it would be better to sift this rumor to the bottom.

"He was fighting with a fellow named Scrap Johnson, about some girl or other," Tom answered. "I reckon that's why he wasn't so keen about mentioning it to you."

His tone had a malicious edge, but Kay hardly heard it. Her mind was flashing back to the events of the morning. It might have been possible, while she had been in the bank, for this thing to have happened. She had been so preoccupied with her own troubles when she came out of the bank that she had not noticed Ted particularly.

She suddenly remembered something

Ted had said when he had announced on the mesa that he meant to fight Scrap Johnson. He had said he was going to give him a "second" lesson! Kay had noticed this remark at the time, with a wondering conjecture, but in the fast-moving events afterwards she had forgotten it.

"Yeah; the two of 'em had it out, hot and heavy." Kay suddenly came back to the present and Tom's droning voice, as he recounted the event the way it had been told to him. "Everybody thought this Scrap fellow was going to lick the stuffing out of him, but Gaynor got him down by a trick twist. Then he threatened he'd kill him if he ever heard him mention his girl's name again."

Tom paused to let this piece of information sink in, his eyes never leaving Kay's face as he watched her reaction to this unexpected news.

Feeling his gaze on her, Kay steeled herself to hide her surprise and confusion. It seemed impossible with all that had passed between them since, that Ted shouldn't have mentioned it to her. The only conclusion to be drawn was that he had kept still because he hadn't wanted her to know that he had been fighting about some girl. Pride came to Kay's aid and helped her to conceal the hurt feeling that Ted's lack of confidence gave her.

"There was no reason why he should have mentioned it, if he didn't want to," she observed lightly. "Perhaps as long as he won out, he might have thought it would have seemed like boasting."

"He probably won't mind boasting about it to the black-haired beauty he was fighting for!" Tom chuckled, as he scanned Kay's expression for her reaction to this remark.

"Black-haired! How do you know she was black-haired?" The involuntary question burst out before Kay could stop it.

"Because Scrap Johnson had said something about a black-haired filly!" Tom Runyon went on, deliberately giving a garbled account of the information he had received, his eyes narrowing as he observed the flush that spread over Kay's cheek. "That's what started the fight," he finished.

"Well, he evidently had his reasons for not mentioning it." Kay tried to speak lightly and indifferently, but something seemed suddenly to give way inside her, so that she felt she couldn't possibly go on with this conversation. Whatever the consequences of unceremoniously dismissing Tom Runyon, she simply had to be alone.

She abruptly stood up and held out her hand.

"I'm afraid I'll have to say good night." With the greatest effort of will, Kay kept her voice from trembling. "I've had a strenuous day, and I guess I haven't entirely got over the shock of yesterday."

"Poor little girl!" Tom Runyon's voice was a trifle over-sympathetic as he took her hand in both of his, and bent his face close to her. "You go and get a good sleep, and any time you need any help, you call on Tom Runyon! Just you forget about this investigating business; leave that all to me."

"Thanks," Kay murmured, smiling faintly at him as she drew her hand away. "I hope you'll come over any time you feel like it."

"Trust me!" Tom Runyon boomed heartily. Then he added with heavy gallantry, "You're going to be seeing a whole lot of me, young lady, and don't you forget it!"

Feeling her powers of resistance gradually giving way to the weak, dizzy sensation that was overcoming her, Kay turned without further ceremony and bolted into her cabin. With a half smile of satisfaction on his lips, Tom Runyon strode off to the bunkhouse.

CHAPTER XVII

Turning the Tables

IT was a good half hour after Kay and Ted had left him on the mesa before Scrap Johnson came back to consciousness. Stirring painfully, he tried

to sit up, then fell back as he felt himself constrained by the ropes that bound him. He swore to himself, while he strained against his bonds, and gave a snarl of satisfaction as he felt them give slightly. Alternately resting and working to loosen the knots in the rope, he finally cleared himself and staggered to his feet.

His jaws aching, and his face ugly with rage, he slowly started back to the Flying Six on foot. He had not gone far when he saw a cloud of dust in the distance, and emerging from it the figure of a horseman coming towards him at a full gallop. His jaw set as he recognized Josh Hastings, and his hand made an instinctive grab for his gun. A savage oath burst out as he encountered the empty holster.

Scrap had no illusions as to the reception he would get from his boss. Failure was the one thing for which Josh Hastings had no patience or sympathy, and his fiery temper when he was thwarted was something to reckon with.

"What's the meaning of this?" Josh Hastings pulled his plunging mount to a sliding halt as he came abreast of the plodding puncher. "Where's your cayuse? And where's that option I sent you to get?"

Resentment flared into Scrap Johnson's eyes, and in his reckless mood and rage it was well for Josh Hastings that his holster was empty.

"You were too damn slow," Scrap Johnson snarled. "They beat you to it."

A dark flush came over Josh Hastings' florid face, and he ripped out an oath.

"You mean you let Kay Crandon get there ahead of you?"

"Sure I didn't," Scrap answered sullenly. "I stopped her all right. But when I got to Old Man Warren I found one of her punchers, a guy named Gaynor, had got there ahead of me, and bought up the ridge you wanted and an option on the rest."

Hastings exploded into a string of oaths. "The foxy little filly!" he raged, then broke off short and looked keenly at Scrap. "What do you mean about stopping her? Where is she?"

A reckless disregard of consequences suddenly possessed Scrap. He was slated to be fired anyway, so he might as well get all the revenge he could.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" he jeered. "I've beaten you to it with those red lips, anyway! And believe me they ain't waiting around for you! That same Gaynor guy came up and caught me off guard, damn him, but I'll get even yet!" He gave a wild incoherent laugh at Hastings' expression. "Some rival you've got there!" he ended. "And is she sweet on him? Oh, boy!"

"Shut up, you drunken fool!" Josh Hastings reached over and grabbed Johnson's shoulder with an iron grip. "Give me this whole thing straight!"

"You've got the whole thing straight enough!" Scrap wrenched himself away. "I'm resigning from your outfit anyway, here and now."

"Resigning like hell!" Josh Hastings roared. "You're fired, and the quicker you vamoose from this range, the better!"

"This don't seem to be my popular day!" Scrap Johnson swaggered insolently. "Your sweetheart's boy friend threatened to kill me the next time he saw me. Maybe you can figure why?" he taunted.

A look of cunning flashed into his face at an idea that suddenly struck him, and he reeled over close to Josh Hastings' mount, where his eye had caught sight of a gun in the saddle pocket. Before Josh Hastings could recover from his renewed conviction that he was dealing with a drunken man, Scrap had grabbed the gun and covered him with a lightning draw.

"Hist 'em!" There was nothing drunk about Scrap's tone now, and Josh Hastings dropped his reins and reluctantly obeyed.

"Seein' as how I'm through with this range anyway, I'll make my exit in style," Scrap sneered. "Suppose you

untasten that belt of yours and toss it over here?"

"You'll pay for this good and plenty," Josh Hastings raged, as he obeyed.

"I'm not sticking around to make any payments," Scrap observed. He stooped to pick up the belt with its holster and gun attached, with his left hand, never taking his eyes from Josh Hastings, however, or shifting his aim.

Hooking the belt over his arm, Scrap reached over and grabbed the bridle of his victim's mount.

"Get down!" he ordered, his gun unerringly trained on his former boss. "Now, vamoose yourself," he ended ferociously, when this last command had been obeyed. "You can have that hike back instead of me!"

As Josh Hastings hesitated, Scrap shifted his aim the fraction of an inch, and fired a shot that nipped the brim of his victim's Stetson, thus sending it spinning to the ground.

Without waiting for a further reminder, Josh Hastings turned away and headed for the Flying Six, spluttering with inarticulate rage. After watching him for a second, Scrap Johnson swung into the saddle and headed at a gallop for the distant blue ridges of the Bitter Root Mountains.

CHAPTER XVIII

A Gruesome Discovery

BY the time Josh Hastings reached home, his rage was no longer inarticulate, but it was none the less intense. In the two hours during which he had indulged in the unaccustomed exercise of trudging painfully across the hard sun-baked surface of the range, he had had plenty of time to face the bitter truth that he had been made a fool of not only by his former cowhand, but by Kay Crandon as well.

Just when he had seemingly had everything in his own hands, the tables had been turned, and he was now apparently farther than ever from accomplishing his ends. The appearance of Ted Gaynor on the scene particularly enraged him, and the taunting hints that Scrap Johnson had thrown out about his being Kay's "boy friend," made him see red.

The thought of any rival was intolerable, but the idea that the man whom he believed he had put down once and for all in the past should come back to challenge him was an added outrage. With this thought and fury at Scrap Johnson alternately uppermost in his mind, Josh Hastings found himself cherishing two distinct plans of revenge.

First of all, he meant to make his former puncher pay through the nose for his insolence, and his plan here was definite and drastic, although it had to be handled with care. He had no idea of telling the whole story of his plight, and being the laughing stock of the range; so this prevented him from calling the sheriff to his aid, and following Scrap Johnson up with a posse.

He had a hunch that Scrap was headed for the Idaho state line, and that he planned to make his getaway over the only pass that led over the Bitter Root from this region.

If he followed right after him, there was a good chance of overtaking him. Scrap Johnson would be pretty sure to figure that his one-time boss would rather lose his mount and call it quits on the situation, than let the story leak out of the fix his cowhand had landed him in. Therefore, he wouldn't feel pressed for time, and it would be a fairly easy matter to catch up with him.

"And there won't be any doubt about who'll have the drop this time!" Josh Hastings' thought voiced itself aloud, with a malignant intensity of tone that boded ill for Scrap Johnson when that moment should come.

He stooped down to ease the heel of his boot, then limped along with a groan.

"He'll pay for that damn blister, too," he muttered savagely, as he forged ahead, his eyes squinting into the distance for a glimpse of the scattered buildings of the Flying Six.

Finally they loomed in sight, and Josh Hastings slowed up as he planned his campaign of action; then, regardless of his blistered feet, he broke into a run for a nearby coulee. He had no time to lose if he were going to make the lower corral and get a horse without being seen.

When he had left the ranch to follow Scrap Johnson, he had announced that he might spend the night in town, so no one was expecting him. Right now, the boys would be either in the mess shack or gathered around waiting for the supper call, so here was his chance for a safe getaway.

Following the coulee, he came at last to the lower corral, which was hidden from the ranch buildings, and a good three hundred yards distant from the upper corral. There he roped himself a horse, quickly saddled him and rode back through the coulee which sheltered him from view. Giving the ranch house a wide berth, he headed off for the mountains at a run.

It was over an hour later when Hastings reached the trail that eventually led to the pass across the divide.

The last streams of color from the afterglow of the sunset were fading into light pinks and lavenders, and twilight was well under way, as he started up the climb between the living walls of pines. Only the faintest light penetrated through the thick branches that interlaced overhead, but Josh Hastings pushed on, his lust for revenge still strong upon him.

There would be a moon later, to guide him through the pass in the saddle of the divide's defile, if he had not overtaken his victim by that time, but he figured on coming upon him before he reached the central divide. Urging his horse on, he finally emerged from the heavily timbered slope of the eastern divide. He topped the ridge and plunged down to the shallow valley that lay between it and the central divide.

After he quickly crossed the valley, Josh Hastings rode his mount on up the scantily timbered slope. The light of the rising moon gradually spread over the whole landscape, and by the time Hastings reached the crest of the pass, it was high in the heavens.

Just beyond the saddle of rock was a small grassy plateau, which harbored the spring-fed stream from whose mysterious depths water flowed in both directions, part seeking the Bitter Root River in Montana, and part flowing to the Clear Water River in Idaho.

As Hastings neared this strange spot, his mount plunged restively, and instead of making for the inviting water that gleamed ahead in the moonlight, he balked and tried to whirl back and head through the pass again. Steadying him, and driving on with a sharp cut of his quirt, Josh Hastings reached the small grassy meadow that bordered the stream.

As he peered ahead through the moonlight, he made out a strange, hunched form lying by the edge of the water. He swung his mount sharply at right angles and headed him away from his gruesome discovery. Dismounting at some little distance, he came back on foot to investigate, a baffled sense of rage rising in him at the thought of being cheated of his revenge.

When he turned the inert figure over, he let out a startled oath as he gazed at the deadly white face thus exposed to the moonlight. Instead of the pinched features of Scrap Johnson that he had expected to see, the still face of Ted Gaynor in its frame of glossy black hair, stared up at him.

CHAPTER XIX

Revenge

RECOILING in the first surprise of finding his other enemy so unexpectedly delivered into his hands, Josh Hastings stared back at the seemingly dead face for a long moment. Then he dropped on his knees and felt Ted's heart.

A grunt of disappointment escaped

him, as he detected a faint beat. But after examining the wound that gaped in the fallen man's chest, a grim smile of satisfaction flickered for a moment on his lips.

"Reckon a good enough job's been done on you, after all," he observed callously, as he rose to his feet and stooped down to pull some grass to wipe the blood off his hands. "Scrap Johnson's saved me some trouble there, all right."

He scanned the ground carefully, walking back and forth in an ever widening semi-circle around the wounded man. "Looks like he got a shot from ambush," he mused aloud, as he failed to find any traces of footprints or trampled grass.

"Hello! What's this?" He stopped short and bent down to examine a large flat stone that harbored a strange dark spot on its rough gray surface.

Josh Hastings experimentally stuck his finger on it, and exploded into an oath as he pulled it back, covered with a sticky red stain.

"Begins to look more like a duel!"

He leaned down close and found several more dark spots, leading away from the stone. Following them, he came to some trampled grass, and with growing excitement he followed in the tracks. After going fifty feet or so, he came at last on the object of his search. A dark form lay in the underbrush by the edge of the grassy spot, and this time, as Josh Hastings leaned close to identify this second victim, he saw the man he had expected to find in the first place.

A brief examination showed him to be far less seriously wounded than Ted Gaynor. He had evidently fainted from loss of blood from a flesh wound in his arm, but his pulse and his heart were strong. An ugly look twisted Josh Hastings' mouth, as he stood looking down at the man he had pursued with such ruthless intent for vengeance. A cunning gleam came into his eyes as he glanced back to where Ted Gaynor lay.

It was easy enough to reconstruct what had happened. Scrap Johnson had undoubtedly won the draw and fired first, and Gaynor's shot had gone wild, first catching by chance the fleshy part of Johnson's arm.

There wasn't a doubt in Josh Hastings' mind that Ted Gaynor was done for. But just in case he might, by some miracle, pull through, why not frame him, so that suspicion of what Josh was about to do would be forever pinned on this enemy of his?

He now had the chance to fix things so that no question would ever be raised about how Scrap Johnson met his end. Dead or alive, Ted Gaynor would be held responsible. Working his dastardly plot out step by step, Josh Hastings took off his bandanna and wrapped it carefully about his hand. Then, he went swiftly back to where Ted Gaynor lay.

He bent down and loosened the fingers of the hand that still gripped the gun that Kay had given to Ted. Holding it with the bandanna, so that no touch of incriminating fingerprints could get on it, Josh Hastings slowly drew it from the loosened grip.

Suddenly, and without any warning, he felt Ted's dark eyes on him; then, as suddenly again, the lids dropped, and the body he was bending over was as inert and lifeless as before. Doubting the evidence of his own senses, but with his heart pounding suffocatingly in his ears at the memory of that strangely seeing look from those dark eyes, Josh Hastings held himself rigidly still.

The weird beauty of the scene was lost on him, but something of the eerie quality of that mysterious spot from which waters eventually flowed to the Atlantic and the Pacific, made his breath come quicker and raised a momentary panic in him. As he stared at Ted Gaynor's white face, he watched for any further sign of life, but it lay still as death in the moonlight.

Hastings' breath came more normally again. While he was cursing himself for a fool, he lifted up Ted's gun and walked halfway back toward Scrap

Johnson, where he took careful aim and fired. The shot reverberated from the rocky walls of the pass behind him, intensified by the silence, so that it sounded like the blast of a cannon. There was a convulsive jerk of Scrap Johnson's body and a dark spot appeared in his temple and slowly spread.

Ted Gaynor lay as before, completely remote from this scene of violence. He seemed as dead as the man who had just been murdered. Dropping the gun from which he had fired the fatal shot, Josh Hastings knelt down and deliberately crawled back to the spot where Ted Gaynor lay.

Hastings rose to his feet and looked back critically over the trail he had beaten through the grass. He could see Ted's gun gleaming where he had let it fall, and a cruel smile twisted his lips. Dead or alive, he had framed Ted Gaynor. Whoever found the two bodies could not escape the inference of that dropped gun. At one stroke he had been able, not only to get his revenge on Scrap, but to wipe Ted Gaynor from his path.

No matter what Kay might have thought of Ted, she was not the kind to let her thoughts linger over a proved murderer. From now on, the way with Kay should be clear sailing. Walking slowly over to his horse, Josh Hastings swung into the saddle and headed back toward the pass.

CHAPTER XX

Shelter

THE moon hung low in the western sky, and moonlight and dawn were mingled in a cold gray light, before Ted Gaynor opened his eyes again. For a long interval he lay staring straight ahead, his eyes darkened with pain. Gradually the gentle trickle of the water penetrated to his consciousness, and he was suddenly aware of his burning throat and the fever that blazed through him.

He tried to pull himself over to the water, but fell back with a groan at the intolerable pain in his chest. A wild look came into his eyes, and he muttered incoherently. Slumping down again by the water that was so near and yet so far, he seemed on the point of giving up. Finally, with a mighty effort, he roused himself and rolled over, so that he could reach the edge of the stream.

As he sucked in a great gulp of the life-giving drink, Ted's mind cleared for a moment, and he realized where he was and what had happened in his third encounter with Scrap Johnson, on his way over to the Clear Water Basin. He had dismounted to get a drink at the headwaters of the pass, and, just as he was in the act of quenching his thirst, he heard a rasping challenge behind him. Whirling about and drawing at the same time, he had seen Scrap Johnson a short distance away.

The next instant there had been the roar and blaze of two guns, but Scrap Johnson's bullet reached its mark first, while Ted's went wild. From that point, memory registered nothing but a blank void shot through with intolerable pain and nightmare dreams. Doubtless Scrap Johnson had ridden on and left him to die.

All details of the night blurred into delirium, as the pain in his chest swept over him again, but although the delirium persisted, he did not lose consciousness. Through it all ran a subconscious will to live, a determination to pull through for Kay's sake. She needed him; he mustn't fail her!

By a gigantic effort, and propelled by this inner insistent force, Ted pulled himself up on his hands and knees and began slowly and painfully to drag himself along the edge of the stream.

Two thoughts possessed him above all others. He mustn't lose the trail of the water; he must stay by it, so that he could quench the thirst that burned in him. And he mustn't let himself relax and lie down; once he did that, he would never get up again.

Gradually the dawn lightened, and when the first rays of the sun glistened

on the headwaters of the Bitter Root and Clear Water rivers, Ted had managed to drag himself five hundred yards or more through the scrub pines that dotted the southeastern slope of the divide.

At the point of exhaustion, but still pushed on by that mysterious will to live that functioned without any conscious control, he pushed on to a small clearing that appeared unexpectedly through the trees.

At the far end of it was a tumbled-down and apparently deserted shack. Making for it, in a blind instinct to reach shelter, Ted struggled over to this goal, muttering in incoherent delirium. As he approached, there was a slight movement behind the shuttered window; and the next minute, a figure appeared in the broken-down doorway.

For a terrified second, the girl in the doorway and the exhausted and delirious man stared at each other. The girl clutched the sagging wooden frame of the door, her brown eyes wide, and her dark hair in sharp contrast to her face, which showed up without an ounce of color in her startled surprise of the moment.

The amazement in her look gradually changed to concern as she took in Ted's desperate plight, and with a cry of pity she ran over to him and stooped down to try to help him. With a convulsive effort, Ted struggled to straighten up; but he immediately sank back, unconscious.

Her first terrified surprise over, the girl proved herself equal to the emergency facing her. She could not have been more than eighteen, but she had a wiry strength in her tall, slender frame. Half carrying, half dragging Ted, she managed to get him to the door of the shack. The early morning sun had gradually become obscured by dark clouds that piled up in the east and threatened a sudden downpour.

After one glance at the lowering sky, the girl darted inside the tiny enclosure and quickly made up the cot on which she had evidently spent the night. Then, with one last mighty effort, she pulled Ted inside and managed to lift him onto the cot, just as the first heavy drops of the storm splashed on the roof.

Panting from her exertion, she leaned back a moment against the wall and studied the face of the man she had brought in. Evidently reassured by what she saw, she dropped to her knees with a murmur of pity and expertly examined his wound. The girl rose to her feet and took a basin which she filled with water. Pulling a clean cloth out from the drawer of a rude washstand in one corner, she deftly proceeded to wash Ted's wound.

The rain, gathering with the swift intensity of mountain storms, beat a wild tattoo on the roof, and gusts of wind shook the tiny shelter to its foundations. However, the girl was oblivious to the outside elements, as she bent with absorbed attention to her battle with death.

CHAPTER XXI

Waiting

KAY waked up with a start, as a ray of the early morning sun slanted through her cabin window, and shone insistently in her eyes.

"Thank goodness the sun's out at last!" She glanced out the window, then snuggled down in bed again to indulge in a few moments of tempting day dreams.

It was the third day since Ted had left, and Kay planned with happy excitement the way she would greet him when he arrived with his mother and sister. She had recovered from her hurt feeling at the news Tom Runyon had brought of Ted's first fight with Scrap Johnson. Whatever reasons he had had for not telling her, she was going to give him the benefit of the doubt and wait until he was ready to tell her.

Kay smiled drowsily to herself. One thing she was sure of! He hadn't been thinking of any dark-haired girl when he had said good-by to her! And somehow, she knew that he wasn't going to

waste any time getting back to her.

During the storm that had raged for the last two days, Kay had busied herself getting the extra cabin ready for Ted's mother and sister. It had been furnished in a rough sort of way, and by picking out odds and ends from the bunkhouse and using some of the few things that had been saved from the fire, Kay had contrived to make it quite home-like.

Babs had ridden over once in the downpour, to report that all was well at the Flying Six, and that Aunt Kate and she were in no hurry to leave their present quarters. A frown puckered Kay's forehead as her thoughts shifted from Ted to the situation at the Flying Six. It was galling to be accepting Josh Hastings' hospitality for members of her family, even if she wasn't accepting it for herself.

She hadn't seen him since that visit when she had told him of her plans, with such near-disastrous consequences. One good thing, at least, had come out of it. She had positive proof now that Josh Hastings was working against her. The doubtful point was, whether or not he knew that she was aware of his efforts to get the timberland away from her.

Unless Scrap Johnson had gone back and reported what had happened, Josh Hastings would have no way of knowing whether or not Kay had known of his plot. And Kay had a hunch that Scrap Johnson wouldn't be any too eager to describe that afternoon's events to his boss. He would be much more likely to realize that his usefulness on this range was over, and to clear out without any embarrassing explanations.

In that case, at least while Aunt Kate and Babs were under his roof, it would be best to pretend ignorance of Josh Hastings' real attitude toward her. Also, it would be easier to keep her eye on him, if she didn't let matters come to an open break. Jumping out of bed with a sudden desire to express her excited anticipation by action, Kay hurriedly dressed, and ran up to the mess shack for breakfast.

Ted and his family probably wouldn't arrive before noon, anyway, but there was still a number of finishing touches that she wanted to put on the cabin. Giving an involuntary skip of sheer joy of living at the beauty of the morning, Kay drew in a long breath of the invigorating air. After the two-day downpour, everything was so fresh and glistening that it must be a good omen.

The morning flew past, and by noon Kay had the cabin completely finished and shining brightly for its new occupants. She had a guilty feeling that she should have ridden over to see Aunt Kate instead of devoting her whole morning to the pleasant excitement of getting ready for Ted, but she eased her conscience by the thought that she would go over after the arrival of the newcomers, so that she could tell Aunt Kate all about them.

All during lunch Kay had an ear out for the pounding of hoofs and the rattle of the livery buckboard from Red River, but the quiet of the mesa was undisturbed.

The afternoon wore on, and by four o'clock Kay found herself nervous and irritable with disappointment. If she waited any longer, it would be too late to ride over to see Aunt Kate; and she'd never hear the end of it, if she let all of the day go past without seeing her.

On the other hand, she'd be sure to miss Ted, if she started off now. Artlessly persuading herself that it would be very rude not to be there to greet Ted's mother and sister, and that seeing Ted himself had nothing to do with it, Kay hung around.

Finally, at six o'clock, when the mesa bell clanged out, Kay reluctantly admitted that they weren't going to arrive that day. At supper, she was silent and abstracted, dwelling in her thoughts rather than in the conversation going on about her. Suddenly she was aware that Seth was speaking to her.

"What did you say, Seth?" She came to with a start.

"Gosh, you must be getting deaf!" Seth grumbled. "I've been asking you about six times when you expected Gaynor back. I thought it was today."

"It was," Kay answered, "but something must have happened to delay him. I'm sure he'll be here tomorrow."

"Here's hoping," Seth growled. "We can't let any grass grow under our feet getting that barn started. I'm going to start cutting timber tomorrow, whether he's back or not."

"He'll be here," Kay predicted confidently. She paused a moment at the door of the shack and looked out. "Isn't it great after the rain?"

"I'll say it is," Seth agreed. "The equinox must have got kind of mixed up this year to give us that storm so early. But I ain't kicking none. Makes the danger of fire just that much less."

Kay nodded absent-mindedly to this remark. Then she sauntered down to the corral and whistled Flicker to her. Obeying a sudden impulse, she got him out and saddled him; after she had ridden up to her cabin for her sweater she headed out onto the mesa.

Deciding to kill two birds with one stone, and ride the restlessness out of her system by going over to see Aunt Kate, Kay started off for the Flying Six at a brisk gait.

It would be moonlight by nine o'clock, she reflected, and she could easily be back by eleven. If she didn't go now, she'd simply have to go tomorrow, and then she'd miss being there when Ted arrived. Darkness had fallen when Kay clattered up to the Flying Six ranch house. At her whoopee, Babs and Ruth came dashing out to meet her. Dismounting, she met them at the foot of the steps, and they all three burst into the living room together, their arms intertwined.

"Well, well, bless me if you don't all look the same age!" Josh Hastings got up and came toward them. Though he addressed the whole trio, his eyes were fixed on Kay, with her bright eyes and flushed cheeks framed in a tousled mop of auburn curls.

Kay instantly straightened up and smoothed her hair. It was all she could do to repress the angry contempt and scorn she felt for this man, who had tried by such sneaking means to get the best of her. But she realized that for the moment, at least, she must act as though nothing had happened to change her usual attitude toward him.

"Where've you been all day?" Aunt Kate's querulous question broke the awkward moment, and Kay turned to her with relief.

"I was terribly sorry not to get over sooner," she apologized, as she contritely went over and kissed her aunt. "But I was waiting around for Ted Gaynor to come back with his mother and sister."

A curious pause followed these words, and something made Kay glance up keenly at Josh Hastings. His eyes were narrowed on her with an enigmatic stare, and a half smile twisted his lips into a sinister line. Kay felt a cold, unreasoning clutch at her spine, and it was with the greatest difficulty that she repressed the involuntary shudder that contracted her muscles.

The memory of that premonition she had had when Ted said good-by to her flashed over her again, but she sternly ignored it. No matter what Josh Hastings had tried to do to her, she couldn't blame him for Ted's failure to appear! She at least had to be fair enough to admit that.

"I reckon you've made a mistake, taking on that man and a whole parcel of relatives," Aunt Kate broke through the strained moment. "It'll be a good thing if he doesn't show up at all."

Josh Hastings let out a great guffaw. "Trust Aunt Kate to hit the nail on the head!" he exclaimed, with indulgent appreciation. "She's said a mouthful!"

"Sure I have," Aunt Kate agreed complacently, a pleased smile on her lips at the flattery of her host's glance.

"Perhaps I have made a mistake." Kay obeyed a sudden wicked impulse and added, "If they aren't coming, you

and Babs could come back now and have that cabin."

"Well, seein' you've promised it to them, I reckon you'll have to see it through."

Kay smiled at Aunt Kate's hurried change of tactics as she saw herself transferred from the comfort of her present quarters to the rigors of pioneer life in a cabin.

"How about that timberland you were thinking of buying the last time you were here?" Josh Hastings' tone was elaborately careless as he put this question, but his eyes were alert as he studied Kay's expression to try to discover whether or not Scrap Johnson had told her what his errand to town that day had been.

The fact that Kay had come over to the Flying Six would seem to indicate that she had not discovered his effort to double-cross her, but Josh Hastings was eager to get this point cleared up. If Scrap had told her, he'd have quite a bit of explaining to do, and he had a plausible yarn all ready. But if she knew nothing about it, his best line was to let well enough alone.

"Oh, yes; I was telling you about that!" Kay met his glance with wide-eyed innocence. "I bought it up; in fact, one of my punchers was in town attending to it for me that afternoon I was here. Didn't I mention it?"

"No, you didn't." Josh Hastings' efforts to conceal his feelings were less successful than Kay's, and she smiled inwardly with wicked satisfaction at his disgusted tone.

"Well, if you take my advice, you'll sell out while you've got a chance," Aunt Kate put in her word. "Josh Hastings, here, is giving you the best offer you're likely to get."

"Perhaps." Kay turned to the door to hide the flash of anger she felt against her aunt for being such an easy tool in Josh Hastings' hands. "I'll have to be getting back now."

"I'm going with you," Josh Hastings announced.

"No; you mustn't!" Kay expostulated, angry at herself for not having foreseen this outcome of her visit. "I'd rather go alone. It's moonlight, and I'm not the least bit afraid."

"That's not the point." Josh Hastings reached up for his hat and coat. "I'm doing this for my own pleasure."

Realizing that she was fairly caught, and that to protest any further would be to attach undue importance to the situation, Kay gave in as gracefully as she could; and after saying good night to Babs and her aunt, the two started off together.

CHAPTER XXII

Trapped Again

FOR some time Kay and Josh Hastings rode through the moonlight without saying anything. As he had insisted on coming, Kay decided to leave the burden of the conversation to him, and the magic of the night inevitably drew her thoughts to Ted.

The long rolling reaches of the mesa stretched out in a silver radiance before them, broken only by ghostly clumps of brush, with their weird, twisted shadows lengthening in the moonlight. If only Ted had come when he had said he would, she would be taking this ride with him instead of Josh Hastings, Kay reflected, with a renewed wave of disappointment. As though reading her thoughts, her companion suddenly broke the long silence, chiming in with what she was thinking with an uncanny insight.

"Your Aunt Kate was right about that Gaynor guy, Kay." His tone was full of a friendly protection. "There are a few things I want to tell you about him, and then I think you'll agree with her."

"Yes?" Kay waited non-committally for what he had to say, although her eyes held a hostile disbelief of anything it might be.

"I'm surprised that he'd have the nerve to come to any range where he knew I was," Josh Hastings went on. "But I reckon he won't stay long, even

if he does show up—which I doubt."

"Why?" asked Kay interestedly.

Josh Hastings hesitated, then brought out with a show of reluctance: "It's an ugly story, but I think you ought to know it, for your own protection. When I had my ranch over in the Clear Water Basin, this Gaynor was punching for Old Man Gage of the X Bar L. He was involved in a rustling raid of his boss' cattle, and the shooting of his son." He paused a moment, then added, "There was a girl mixed up in it, too, but I won't go into that."

"You may as well give me the whole story, now you've started." Kay's voice was coldly unconvinced and Josh Hastings flared up at her implied disbelief.

"Just a pretty case of promising to marry the girl and then deserting her." Josh Hastings shot a sidelong look at Kay to get her reaction to this news, and as he caught the quick look of surprised unbelief, he added, "She committed suicide."

"How do you know that Ted Gaynor was responsible for her committing suicide?" Kay demanded hotly. The story was certainly ugly, but she found it impossible to associate it with Ted. He couldn't have been guilty of a thing like that! It sounded much more like the sort of thing of which Josh Hastings himself would be capable.

"It was common talk," Hastings answered her indignant question with a more tolerant tone. "I don't wonder you are startled. But now you can see the probable reason for his disappearance. He knew you'd hear his story sooner or later from me, and figured he'd better clear out while the going was good."

For several moments they rode on in silence, then Kay said slowly, "I'm certainly not going to condemn anyone by 'common talk' and rumor. You ought to have something more tangible to go on, before you spread a story like that to ruin a man's reputation."

Josh Hastings gave a short laugh. "I must say your confidence in me isn't any too flattering."

"Would you repeat that story to Ted Gaynor's face?" Kay demanded.

"Sure I would! But don't worry; I won't have to," Hastings sneered. "Take my word for it, that talk about showing up again with his mother and sister was all one grand bluff."

Kay made no answer, but she touched Flicker with her heel and set a sharper pace for home. She didn't for one minute believe Josh Hastings' story, but she was animated by a sudden imperative desire to get rid of his hateful presence.

"What's the hurry?" He pounded up beside her, and reaching over, put a possessive hand on her arm. "It's a crime to go rushing through a moonlight night at this pace! Slow down and I'll promise not to tell you any more sordid stories."

Kay's only answer was to shake her arm free and urge Flicker on to greater speed. An ugly look settled on Josh Hastings' face as he was forced by her action to follow suit. Flicker was a faster horse than his, and he had no more time for talking, if he was going to keep up.

Already, he was losing ground a bit, and as Kay glanced over her shoulder and saw him falling behind, a reckless spirit of mischief overcame her prudence. She knew it was a silly thing to rouse his temper, but she couldn't resist the temptation to pay him back for telling her that story about Ted.

Realizing perfectly that nothing was more galling to a man's pride than to be left behind by a girl, she deliberately pushed Flicker to the limit and streaked ahead of him.

She had arrived at the corral, turned Flicker loose, and was just starting back to her cabin when Hastings came pounding up. He pulled up so sharply that his horse slipped to its haunches and almost went down. The next instant he was off, and before Kay could guess his intention, he seized her in his arms and pressed his lips savagely to hers.

"That'll teach you not to play mon-

key tricks with me!" His voice was thick with rage and passion, as he held Kay's shoulders in an iron grip and bent his face close to hers. "You'd better learn it now! Because I mean to marry you, you little spitfire!"

Regardless of Kay's blazing eyes and her choked "Let me go!" as she writhed in his grasp, he kissed her again; then he sprang into his saddle and galloped off without a backward look. Panting and trembling with fury, Kay watched him go, her mind seething with the outrage. It had all taken place in such a fraction of a second, that she could hardly believe that it had happened at all.

With a gasp of disgust, she wiped the back of her hand across her lips, and clenched her fist as she gazed after the retreating figure in the moonlight. Much as she had disliked Josh Hastings, she had never thought to be on her guard against a thing like this! Why, he was old enough to be her father! She grabbed her handkerchief and scrubbed her lips as though to cleanse them of his polluting touch.

Marry him! A shudder ran through her, and a weak, helpless feeling of dread laid a cold clutch on her heart. Suddenly she felt utterly defenseless and alone. Whom could she turn to? Aunt Kate and Babs were completely under Josh Hastings' spell; she could expect no help from them. And if Ted failed her. . . .

Josh Hastings' insinuating story flashed in her mind, and in spite of her disbelief she found herself going over it bit by bit.

Even if the worst inferences about the girl were false, Ted had probably been involved in some way with her. And there was that other rumor about the dark-haired girl he had fought over, that very day when he had later come so splendidly to her rescue.

Kay straightened up suddenly and walked quickly back to the cabin, her head proudly high, though her breath still came in quick, uneven jerks. It was certainly nothing to her how many girls Ted had! All she wanted him to come back for was to build her house and barn for her!

Memory of Josh Hastings' kiss flashed over her again. Running up the steps of her cabin, she hastily lit a candle and flung herself down at her father's desk. Something in its very solidity and the associations that clung around it gave her a comforting sense of strength.

"He thinks he's going to marry me, does he?" Kay savagely pulled open a drawer and took out some paper. "We'll see about that!"

She scribbled a note to Aunt Kate, saying that she was going to send over for them the next afternoon. They could have her cabin, and she could sleep outside in her sleeping bag. Signing it without further explanation, she left it on her desk, so that she could give it to one of the boys to take over the first thing in the morning. Then, with the same feverish haste, she undressed and flung herself into bed.

After a restless night of both waking and sleeping nightmares, Kay was out at the crack of dawn, and over at the bunkhouse with her note. When she had actually dispatched Shorty with the summons to her family to leave the Flying Six, she felt better. By the time breakfast was over, she had persuaded herself that Josh Hastings had made up that story out of whole cloth, for the sole purpose of damaging Ted in her eyes.

"When Ted comes back, I'm going to tell him the whole thing," she resolved, as she made her way over to the bunkhouse to consult Seth about getting another cot put up in her cabin.

It was nearly ten o'clock before Shorty came back from the Flying Six. Kay hastily tore open the note he handed her, addressed in her aunt's cramped, old-fashioned handwriting. A slow color rose in her cheeks as she read it through and then started it over again. She was suddenly aware of Shorty's eyes on her, and, biting her

lip to steady herself, she looked up at him.

"Thanks, Shorty; there isn't any answer." She turned away with the note clenched in her hand, and ran down to her cabin.

Seated at the desk, she spread it out before her and incredulously read its surprising contents again.

> Dear Kay:
>
> Don't be a fool! You're not the first girl to be kissed on a moonlight night! Josh Hastings has told me all about it, and his generous and honorable intentions toward you.
>
> I certainly have no idea of coming back until the house is finished. You can insist on Babs coming, but you'll be pulling a hornet's nest about your ears if you do.
>
> I say again, don't be a fool!
>
> Your affectionate,
>
> Aunt Kate.

Kay drew a long, quivering breath as she settled back and gazed at the door, where some flies buzzed drowsily in the heat. Suddenly, one of them brushed against a cobweb and became more and more enmeshed as it tried to get away. With an impulsive movement Kay jumped up, put a finger through the web and set the insect free.

"If only someone would do that for me!" she murmured, as she settled down and read Aunt Kate's letter again.

Forcing herself not to let her judgment be influenced by her indignation, she tried to consider the situation calmly. What Aunt Kate said about Babs was perfectly true. Kay realized that she hadn't any too strong a hold over Babs' headstrong and self-willed nature; and if she insisted on her coming back in the face of Aunt Kate's determination to stay, life wouldn't be worth living.

Viewed in the light of Aunt Kate's scornful reproval of Kay's attitude, it did seem ridiculous to make such a fuss about a moonlight kiss. By forestalling her, and telling Aunt Kate about it and his desire to marry her, Josh Hastings had cut most of the ground for righteous indignation from under her feet.

There just didn't seem any way to fight this insidious move of Josh Hastings to get her family under his influence and lined up against her. She could tell Aunt Kate about his plot to get her timberland away from her; but that would involve telling the whole beastly experience with Scrap Johnson. And Kay had none too much confidence in her aunt's discretion, to want to trust her with that story.

Besides, she'd probably explain away Josh Hastings' part in it by saying that he'd been trying to protect her from a foolish move. As long as she was caught in the trap, she might as well accept it gracefully. To have Babs at home, in a rebellious mood, when there was so much to be done, would be anything but a help; and to put such tragic emphasis on a kiss snatched in the moonlight was to magnify the importance of it out of all proportion.

Reluctantly admitting that perhaps she had been a fool to be quite so hasty and dramatic about it, Kay crunched up the note and threw it into the waste basket.

CHAPTER XXIII

Whose Gun?

TWO days had passed, and still there was no sign of Ted Gaynor.

"I don't undertsand it, Flicks," Kay whispered brokenly, as she slipped off Flicker's bridle and leaned her head for a moment against his mane. "Do you suppose—" She broke off abruptly, as she saw Shorty coming towards her.

"Hi, there! Let me do that!" He took the bridle from her hand. "You hop to it and get some chow, or you'll be out of luck."

"Thanks, Shorty." Kay braced herself and tried to smile. "Has everyone finished?"

"Seth and a couple of the boys are still there," Shorty answered, bending down to Flicker's cinch. "What d'you think of the timber we're cutting?"

"I think it's fine; only I hate to see those great tamaracks come crashing down!"

"Now, ain't that just like a girl?" Shorty commented to Flicker, cocking a quizzical eye at Kay to catch the effect of his words. "Here we're breaking our backs building a barn for her, and she wants us to keep the trees to have picnics under!"

"No, I don't, Shorty." Kay laughed at Shorty's comical expression in spite of her heavy heart. "I'm as anxious to get the barn built as you are, only I wish. . . ." She left the sentence unfinished.

"Sure; so do I," Shorty agreed, answering Kay's unspoken thought with the freedom of an old friend. "You know, it almost seems as though something must have happened to that guy. He wasn't the kind to go back on his word."

"He wasn't, was he?" Kay agreed eagerly; then, fearful of saying too much, once the flood-gates of her troubled thoughts were opened, she turned and made for the mess shack.

As she and Seth were discussing the dimensions of the new barn, a sudden clatter of hoofs broke in on them. Springing to her feet with a quick premonition of trouble, Kay was halfway to the door when it was suddenly darkened by the lanky figure of Zeke Farley, the sheriff of Butte County.

"Hello, there!" He pulled off his hat, as his eye caught Kay. "You're just the girl I wanted to see. Do you know that gun?"

For a moment everything swam before Kay's eyes, as she caught sight of the gun the sheriff held out to her. She felt as though every drop of blood was drained from her heart, while she stared at it and braced herself against one of the chairs. Conscious of curious faces crowded into the doorway behind the sheriff, she cleared her throat once or twice, before she could bring herself to speak.

"Why—why, yes," she faltered. "That was one of Dad's."

Seth came around the table beside her and took the gun out of the sheriff's hand. "Sure it was," he corroborated. Then he added before Kay could stop him, "But, look here! Wasn't this the one you gave to that Gaynor guy?"

"What's that?" the sheriff snapped, his keen eyes traveling from Seth to Kay. "Gave it to who? When? Where is he now?"

Kay moistened her lips before attempting to answer this rapid fire of questions. Her mind was leaping in lightning flashes from one desperate conjecture to another.

What did this gun in Zeke Farley's hands mean? Was Ted hurt—or killed? Or had he killed someone else? Beating through her fears for him was the instinctive feeling that she must watch her step and not say something that would incriminate him.

"Where—where did you find it?" She stalled for time by meeting the sheriff's questions with another.

"Never mind that now." Zeke Farley spoke more gently as he saw Kay's distress, but his eyes were none the less keen. "Just tell us everything you know about it."

Realizing that all she could do was to tell the truth, Kay explained how she had given the gun to Ted Gaynor, and had last seen it when he started off for Clear Water Basin, to get his mother and sister and bring them back.

"How did the gun come into your hands?" Kay ended, forcing herself to face the facts, whatever they might be.

The sheriff hesitated and gave an imperceptible nod to Seth over Kay's head.

"Don't you worry about that," he evaded soothingly. "I'll talk to Seth outside."

"No, you won't!" Kay interposed, her eyes flashing, and her body straight and taut with determination. "You've got to tell me anything you have to say about it! I won't be kept in suspense."

The sheriff shrugged. "Well, I reckon you've got to hear about it

sooner or later, so there's no point in making a mystery about it. Also, I want to know all you can tell me about this Gaynor guy—where you met him and how long you've known him, and so forth."

"But, how did you come by the gun?" Kay insisted. "You must tell me that first."

The sheriff took the gun back from Seth and gravely weighed it in his hand as he eyed it critically.

"There ain't much doubt," he said slowly, "but what this gun has killed a man."

Kay put her hand up to her throat. "Yes—yes—go on!"

"One of the fire patrol was coming back over the divide yesterday, and there by the headwaters he found a dead man, shot through the temple. And not thirty feet away, he came on this gun, lying where the murderer had left it.

"The dead man was a mile or so over on the Idaho side of the state line, but this guy was headed this way, so he brought the gun down to me. I called up the sheriff at Clear Water Basin, but he was off after a bunch of rustlers, and his deputy asked me to help out on the job until he could join me.

"Who was the man?" Kay got the question out through parched lips.

"A fellow named Scrap Johnson, who was one of the Flying Six outfit. He—"

He got no further, for Kay, with a cry of mingled relief and dismay, suddenly crashed down on the chair near her.

"No—no! I'm all right!" She pushed Seth and the sheriff away, as they reached out to steady her. "It's just the horrible thought of Dad's gun being involved in a murder, that— But how do you know it was murder?" she demanded with renewed energy. "There might have been a perfectly fair fight!"

"Where's this Gaynor bird then? Why didn't he report it?"

A horrible fear clutched hold of Kay. "Perhaps he's killed, too," she faltered.

"We've searched all around there," the sheriff answered. "Of course, this two-day storm has washed out any tracks or clues we could go by, but my hunch is that he made a getaway right after the killing, and that he has vamoosed."

"But why would he have left his gun behind?" Kay protested. "He'd never have done such a stupid thing as that, if he'd murdered a man!"

"Search me, but we've no time for guessing," the sheriff answered impatiently. "Tell me all you know about him." He looked from Kay to Seth.

"All I know," Seth broke in, "is tnat he turned up here the night of the fire. Kay had been having him look over some timberland for her, and then decided to have him join the outfit."

"Where'd you get hold of him in the first place?" Zeke Farley turned to Kay, who braced herself for this question she had been dreading. In the midst of her confused horror at this terrible news, one thing was clear: Nothing would make her give the real version of her meeting with Ted.

"Why, I wanted to get hold of some more timberland," she began, "and it seemed a good idea to get someone to go over it, so I—"

"Yes—yes; never mind all that!" the sheriff cut her short. "What I want to know is: How did you come to choose Gaynor? Why not someone from around here?"

"I don't know just why." Kay suddenly decided the only line to take was a helpless, illogical feminine one. "I just thought I'd try him out, and then, if I liked him, he could join the outfit. . . . You thought he was a good addition, didn't you, Seth?" she appealed to Seth, with an attempt to defeat the sheriff's direct questions by irrelevance.

"Sure I did," Seth answered. "He seemed like an A-1 hand to me; but I've been kind of wondering about him,

when he didn't turn up when he said he would."

"How long has this man been dead?" Kay tried another tack to turn the line of the inquiry.

"About four or five days, I should judge." Zeke Farley came back to the remark of Seth's and asked, "What's that about his being expected back?"

"I'll tell you how it was," Kay forestalled Seth. "He'd planned to go back to get his mother and sister, and bring them here to live. You see, he'd worked out a plan for rebuilding." With a few quick words she sketched out Ted's ideas, ending:

"So I know he wouldn't have left us in the lurch unless something had happened to him. He might be wounded, dead or dying himself, while you're accusing him of murder!" She choked up in spite of herself. "I think you ought to be searching for him, to see if he's in trouble, instead of fooling around about a gun!" She fixed the sheriff with an indignant eye.

"We'll be searching for him, all right," the sheriff commented grimly. "I just wanted to make sure my hunch about the gun was right. I thought I'd seen your father toting it. Now that I know you gave it to Gaynor, it clears up a lot, and things look pretty black against him, all right. You probably don't know that he was heard threatening this Scrap Johnson's life, before quite a few witnesses?"

"Before—witnesses?" Kay faltered, her mind flashing back to the scene on the mesa, when Ted had told Scrap Johnson he'd kill him if he ever showed up on the range again. There certainly hadn't been any witnesses there besides herself!

"Yes," the sheriff answered her amazed query. "Gaynor and Scrap Johnson had a fight at Kelly's joint one day last week, and Gaynor got the best of it. According to some of the boys who were there, he threatened to get Scrap, next time."

Tom Runyon's account of the fight at Kelly's flashed in Kay's mind, and with a sick feeling she realized how black the evidence was that was piling up against Ted.

"But that's neither here nor there," said the sheriff, turning to the door. "The first thing is to join up with Sam Cutter, the Idaho sheriff, and catch the bird; we can save the evidence for later." He slipped the gun into his pocket and picked up his hat. "Sorry to be all this bother, Miss Kay. I've got to be getting on now; but while I'm away you try to remember every single thing you can about this Gaynor."

"Where are you going?" Kay asked fearfully.

"Over into the Clear Water Basin to look up his mother and sister first; then I'll report to Sam Cutter's deputy and come back by the pass and search around there some more."

"You'll let me know the minute you hear anything, won't you?" Kay tried to keep the desperate anxiety out of her tone. "We have no telephone now, but you could get hold of Babs at the Flying Six, and she'll ride over and tell me."

"Sure I will." Zeke Farley was already in his saddle as he made this promise. "I hope you're right about his being on the square, but I've got my doubts!"

With this meager encouragement, he picked up his reins and made off.

(*To be continued in the next issue*)

Trail's End

HERE it is the First September Issue, the New Deal working strong, and everything all hunky-dory.

Let's take a deep breath of the good old sage-scented air of the West into our lungs, and face life with a new vigor and new hope. Let Ranch Romances and the Trail's End Club bring a message of courage to your hearts.

And in order that the hand of friendship may be extended beyond new horizons, let's all make an effort to secure new members for our friendly Club.

Incidentally, we shall be publishing the names of active members again soon. So if you want to see your name on the list, write us and let us know your correct name and address, and tell us you wish to be included in the active-member file.

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TRAIL'S END MEMBERSHIP COUPON

I am a regular reader of RANCH ROMANCES.
I want to become a member of Trail's End Club.

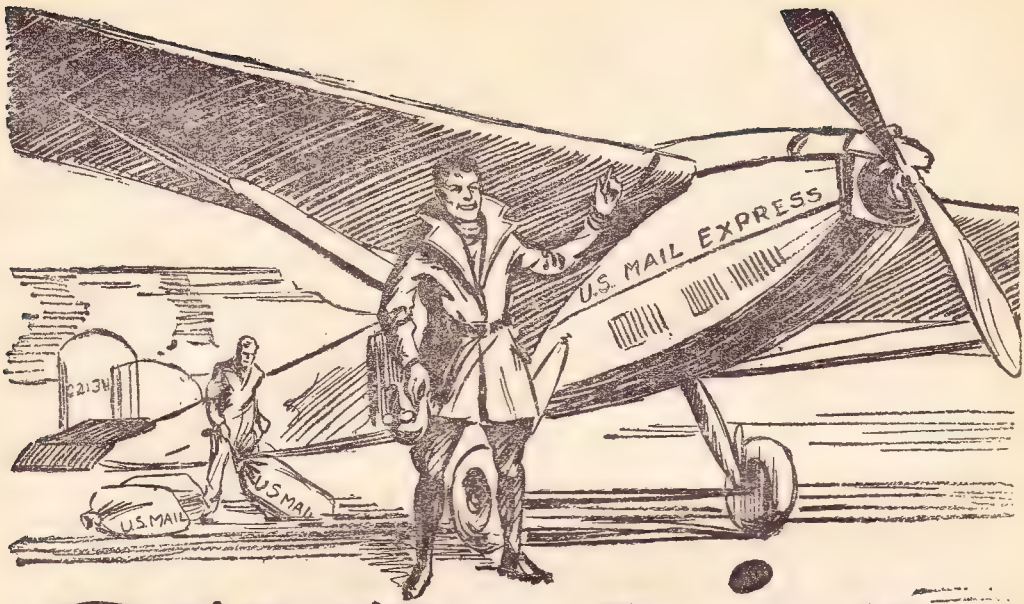
(*Miss*)
(*Mrs.*)
Signed (*Mr.*) .....
Address .....

Three *successive* coupons make you a member of America's greatest outdoor club.

Ten cents brings you the lovely "Trail's End" pin.

You must be a member to secure the pin.

Please *print* your name and address plainly.



our air

OUR AIR MAIL is running daily between the editorial office of RANCH ROMANCES and its readers throughout the world. RANCH ROMANCES is not published for anyone but the reader, and we want you to look upon this magazine as something distinctly your own. Write and tell us exactly the kind of story that you think ought to go into it. And we want to help make friends for our readers. We want to help you to know friends who are thousands of miles away, or within a stone's throw of your own town. OUR AIR MAIL will be glad to forward and exchange letters. The Editor reserves the right to read and turn over to the Postal Authorities, if necessary, anything that is not in keeping with the clean, outdoor spirit of RANCH ROMANCES. Be sure to enclose postage for letters sent by OUR AIR MAIL. Moreover, this department is intended only for readers who actually wish correspondents. Henceforth, each letter must bear the written signature of the writer, and anyone fraudulently signing someone else's name will be investigated.

ALWAYS A BOOSTER

Dear Editor:

I enjoy reading R. R. very much and it's not the only magazine I read either. I have answered many pleas for pen pals but never received a reply, so am asking for pals myself.

I promise not to disappoint anyone who writes to me. I am a blue-eyed, brown-haired girl, sixteen years of age.

Hoping for lots of pen pals, I am

VELMA HARRIS.

R. D. 1,
Deposit, N. Y.

ANOTHER SALT WANTS PALS

Dear Editor:

Have been a reader of your magazine for quite some time, and after reading Our Air Mail column, wonder if it would be possible for another salt to crash it.

Have been in most parts of the world and am anxious to hear from members of the fair sex who are desirous of hearing a few seafaring tales.

I am old enough to know better, fond of all sorts of sports and hope to prove an interesting pen pal to all answering my plea. The arrival of the mail steamer in this part of the world is a much looked forward to event by all hands.

Sincerely,
J. THOMPSON.

Submarine Division Ten,
Asiatic Station,
c/o P. M., Seattle, Wash.

BARBARA IS LONELY

Dear Editor:

I read Ranch Romances and think it's a wonderful magazine. I live on a farm, and oh, how I long for some pen pals! I promise to be a real friend to those who write. My greatest wish is to travel—visit a ranch or a large city, though I prefer a ranch, of course.

Now won't everybody between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five write to me? I hope the cowboys do, too. As for a description. I am quite small, very slim, have dark hair and dark hazel eyes. I enjoy dancing, music, reading, drawing, singing and 'most everything else.

Here's hoping I'll find the mail box full of letters. Best wishes to Ranch Romances.

Yours truly,
BARBARA HALLA.

Cayuga, N. Dak.

GOOD WISHES FROM EFFIE

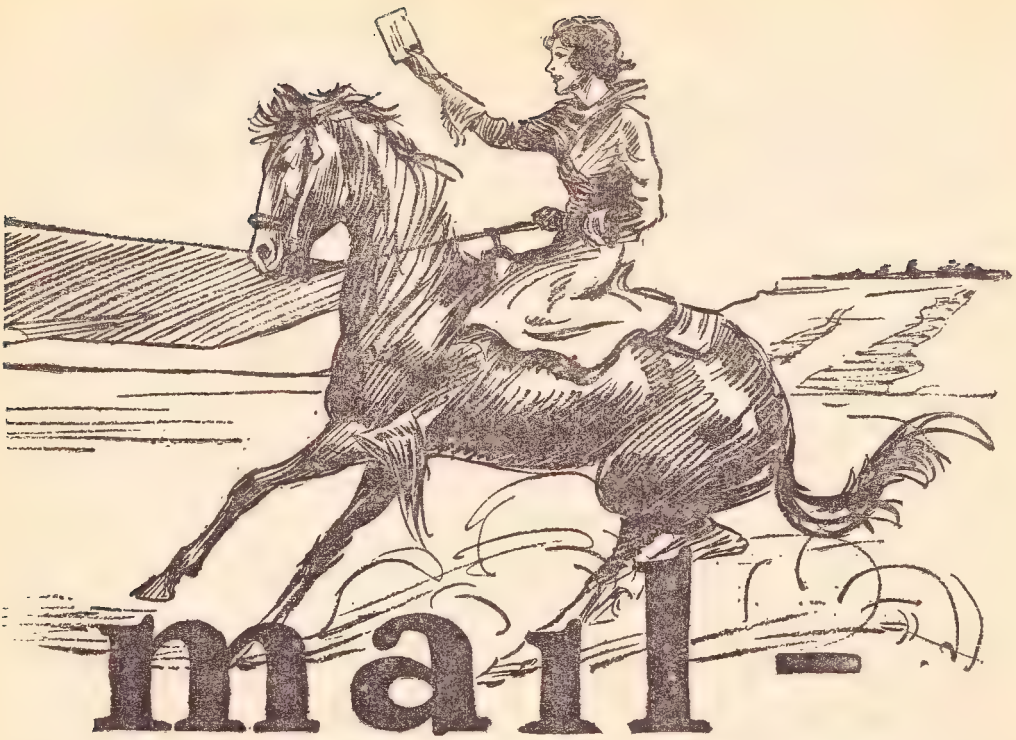
Dear Editor:

Please print this as I am in need of some pen pals. I would like boys and girls from all parts of the world to write to me. As I never see any pleas from the Bahamas I'm sending mine.

I'm seventeen years of age, have brown hair and eyes. Here's wishing Ranch Romances continued success.

Yours truly,
EFFIE MALONE.

P. O. Box 604,
Nassau, N. P.,
Bahamas, B. W. I.



AN ENGLISH BOOSTER

Dear Editor:

I am not a regular reader of Ranch Romances, but I am always eager to buy one, should there be any in stock at English booksellers. Life is terribly boring in the home town of mine. My only pastimes are reading, dancing, and writing letters. I am eighteen years old, and have blue eyes and light brown hair.

If this letter reaches you, I would be ever so grateful if you could place me in your pen pal column.

Yours truly,
RALPH GILFOYLE.

49 Whiteman St.,
Swindon,
Wiltshire, England.

THINKS R. R. IS KEEN

Dear Editor:

I want to congratulate you on that keen magazine, the R. R. It is the best ever.

I am just a seventeen-year-old redhead who hopes to have some pen pals. I promise to answer every letter I receive, and would like to hear especially from cowboys, soldiers and aviators. However, everybody is welcome to write.

"TONY."

Mary Wanuk,
567 E. Broadway,
Winona, Minn.

A CORNER FOR "BABS"

Dear Editor:

Please be so kind as to publish this letter of mine, and perhaps it will bring me some pen pals who would fill my empty mail box.

I am a blonde with blue eyes, a fair complexion, am five feet one inch tall. I'm just a happy-go-lucky girl of nineteen summers.

I promise to answer all mail. Thank you.

"BABS."

Barbara Zav,
131 W. 104th Pl.,
Chicago, Ill.

LET'S GO, HAWAII!

Dear Editor:

I am a soldier stationed at Honolulu, six feet in height, brown wavy hair, blue eyes, like dancing and all sports. With plenty of leisure time, I find letter writing very interesting. I promise to answer all letters from everyone.

Ranch Romances is a fine magazine and is very popular in the Islands. Here's hoping my plea for pen pals is published.

Sincerely yours,
FRANK E. HERRELKO.

Batt. C. 55 C. A.,
Fort Kamehameha,
Honolulu, T. H.

NEWS FROM SCOTLAND

Dear Editor:

I've enjoyed reading Ranch Romances, for several years now, and like every story published in your magazine.

My real reason for writing is to see if there are any boys and girls in any part of the world who would care to write to a lighthouse keeper's daughter. I live on the "Bonnie Banks of Clyde," in the Argyllshire Highlands, not very far from Glasgow. I have visited most of the important towns and cities in Scotland, and will be able to tell all about them to anyone interested.

I am still in my teens, five feet seven inches in height, have gray eyes and fair hair. I am a lover of all sports. I think that's all I can tell you about myself just now, but I can write very interesting letters once I get started.

Wishing Ranch Romances the best of success, and eagerly looking forward to seeing this in print, I remain

Yours truly,
GAY GORDON.

Toward Point Lighthouse,
Via Dunoon,
Argyll, Scotland.

AN EQUESTRIENNE

Dear Editor:

I'm a regular reader of Ranch Romances. Horses and ranch life are very interesting to me, and I am lonely for lots of pen pals of the horse countries.

I am five feet three inches tall, have red hair and brown eyes. My favorite sport is horseback riding. I will be glad to answer any letter.

Sincerely,
MARY MEEHAN.

1515 East Garvey St.
San Gabriel, Calif.

PAGING DANCING ENTHUSIASTS

Dear Editor:

It is indeed a delight for me to write and tell you how much I enjoy the clean, wholesome stories in Ranch Romances. I have corresponded with many pen pals, and now I would like to hear from many more.

I am twenty-two years of age, and am actively engaged in playing in a dance orchestra in and around this city. I would certainly like to hear from some dancing enthusiasts or other musicians. Girls, what would you like to know about the night life here? I'll answer all mail as fast as I can sharpen a pencil. Satisfaction guaranteed, or postage refunded.

Again wishing success to your magazine and its readers, I remain

Yours Sincerely,
N. J. WEXLER.

1009 East 17th St.
Minneapolis, Minn.

LONESOME FARM GIRL

Dear Editor:

I have been reading Ranch Romances from cover to cover for a year or more and now realize what a good mag is like.

I am a lonesome farm girl, fourteen years old, with brown hair, gray eyes and a fair complexion.

Well, here's hoping you ink slingers will fill my mail box.

An R. R. booster,
ELVERNA HOWEN.

Doon, Iowa.
P. S. If Billy Schneider of Sheldon, Iowa, and Frank Draper of Genry, Arkansas, see this, will they please write?

SUCCESS THE FIRST TIME

Dear Editor:

This is our first attempt to crash the gates of Our Air Mail. We are two girls living in the deadest town in Pennsylvania. Incil has light brown hair, hazel eyes, and is sixteen. Marcella has dark brown hair, blue eyes, and is also sixteen.

Our hobbies are swimming, dancing, tennis, golf and hiking. We promise to answer every letter we receive.

Three cheers for Ranch Romances! It's the best magazine there is.

Sincerely,
INCIL VERMILYA,
MARCELLA SHEPHARD.

Grover, Penn.

OUTDOOR GIRL

Dear Editor:

Having been a constant reader of Ranch Romances, I want to say that I am much pleased with the stories it contains, as I am fond of the West.

Our Air Mail section has interested me a great deal, and I would like to join it. I get lonely and would be pleased to have some pen pals between the ages of twenty-four and thirty-five. It would make me happy if you could find a wee corner for me, as I promise interesting letters.

I have blue eyes, medium-brown hair, fair complexion and a sunny disposition. Am fond of dancing, movies, swimming and outdoor sports, such as hiking, tennis and baseball. I live in what used to be the wild and woolly State of Montana.

Come on, pen pals, let's get busy. I will answer promptly all who may care to write, and will also exchange snapshots.

Wishing R. R. the best of luck, I remain

Hopefully,
VIOLET M. MANNING.

Gen. Del.,
Missoula, Mont.

LINDY MAKES A LANDING

Dear Editor:

May I make a landing at your Air Mail station and leave a plea for some true-blue pen pals?

I am eighteen years old, five feet seven inches tall, blond, with hazel eyes. Last but not least, I go in for all sports.

Come on, you sailors, cowboys, girls and all, write to me. I've given my promise to answer every letter I receive.

Wishing R. R. continued success, I am

LINDY COLLETTE.

435 Park Ave.,
Idaho Falls, Idaho.

FROM THE SUNNY SOUTH

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading my second issue of Ranch Romances and I think it is swell. I have read many Western magazines, but this one beats them all. I am nineteen years old, have brown wavy hair and brown eyes, and I'm fond of all sports. It would please me to hear from any of the boys and girls who will write to me.

Sincerely,
DAN ROCK.

902 Kirby St.,
Lake Charles, La.

WANTS A THOUSAND LETTERS

Dear Editor:

Here's a plea for pen pals from a Trail's End member and a reader of your fine mag for four years.

I'm a gay young fellow of nineteen summers, with dark brown hair and blue eyes, five feet nine inches tall. Do I pass? I play the guitar, the uke, the banjo and the mandolin, and like all sorts of out-of-door sports.

My pet hobbies are stamp and postcard collecting. Besides these I like letter writing, and I hope to get at least a thousand letters from all over the world. I can read and write French and Spanish too, folks, and would like some leters from sunny Old Mexico.

Sincerely,
BOB BLANCHARD.

80 Hudson St.
Oneonta, N. Y.

FROM COVER TO COVER

Dear Editor:

I am just a new reader of Ranch Romances, and it sure hits the spot. As far as picking out the best stories, why I think it's a pretty hard job. I begin reading on the first page and go right through to the cover. As I said before, they are all good.

I would be more than glad to hear from anyone who wishes to write to me. I want oceans of pen pals, and promise to answer all letters I receive. I am a girl of sixteen, have brown hair and blue eyes, and am about five fect four inches tall.

Wishing your magazine the best luck in the future, I remain

Most sincerely yours,
FRANCES ZENGWALL.

Route L, Box 152,
Pennock, Minn.

THIRTEEN CANADIAN TARS

Dear Editor:

We are thirteen Canadian tars stationed in Halifax. We all read Ranch Romances and find the stories very interesting.

We would be very grateful if you could find room in your magazine to publish our letter. We would like to hear from people anywhere in America, and will tell them anything they want to know about our navy.

We are all young and not hard to look at. We will be here for the next seven years, so please write.

Thanking you, we are

THE BOYS OF MESS 26.

H. M. C. S. Stadacona,
c/o Naval Barracks,
Halifax, Nova Scotia,
Canada.

"BOB" IS VERSATILE

Dear Editor:

I think Ranch Romances is a splendid magazine. I get a great many thrills out of it. I am only a recent reader, having been introduced to your magazine by a friend.

I would like to get in Our Air Mail column. I am twenty-two years old, have light brown hair and blue eyes. In the summer I indulge in semi-pro baseball, and in the winter I play basketball. I would like to discuss sports with any reader. Of course, I would like to talk—or rather write—about any activity known to young red-blooded youth, such as sports, stage, screen, radio, or even the stock market.

I have traveled about a great deal and would be glad to exchange tales about travel with anyone. I feel sure the readers of Ranch Romances will be glad to correspond with me, and I am also sure that I will answer everyone.

Sincerely,
"BOB."

Robert S. Manley,
609 Howertown Ave.
Catasauqua, Penn.

TUCKED AWAY IN TEXAS

Dear Editor:

I am a constant reader of R. R. and my personal opinion is that it can't be beat.

I am just an eighteen-year-old girl from away out in Texas, yearning for pen pals, and oodles of them. I promise to answer all letters received and will send a snap to the first ten.

So come, every one—young and old—send a line to

HAZEL PHILLIPS.

Kirkland, Tex.

STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

Dear Editor:

Have been a reader of Ranch Romances for some time and wish to say I like most of the stories. I think "Horse Thief Canyon" was one of the best, and the characters in the story seemed so genuine. Have lived in the West and know the whole story could have been possible. That brings me to my plea for Air Mail friends.

I am a stranger in a strange land and know no one except the people with whom I work. So I'm wondering if some middle-aged people in the business world won't take pity on me and help to make my stay in Washington a happy one. I am a rancher's widow, tall, slender with gray eyes, dark hair—not bad-looking, but so lonely.

Will answer all letters and hope I see this in print.

Expectantly,

MARGARET OSNEW.

Gen. Del.,
Washington, D. C.

INDIANA MISS

Dear Editor:

I have been reading Ranch Romances for three years. I enjoy the interesting stories in it, and now I wish to join your Air Mail club. I am thirty years of age, short, have gray eyes and red hair, and a fair complexion.

Come one, come all, and write to little Milly.

Sincerely,

MILLY JONES.

500 North Ninth St.,
Terre Haute, Ind.

HERE'S A REAL PAL

Dear Editor:

I wish to enter my plea for pen pals and also want to tell you how much I appreciate the R. R. I have written to several pals, but thus far have found only one. Through her I found another and during my five weeks in the hospital last summer, they were life savers.

I've been the "chief cook and bottle washer" at home for the last six years. Have light brown hair, blue eyes, and am no vest pocket size as my height is five feet four inches and my weight a hundred and twenty-six pounds. I'm twenty years of age.

I love to dance, swim, and enjoy all sports in general. My hobby is collecting snapshots and songs. Come to me with your joys and sorrows, and I'm sure you will find a real pal. You will always find me at this address, my permanent one.

Long live R. R.!

Sincerely,

IRENE WETTBERG.

Box 25,
Lake Mine, Mich.

OREGON BOOSTER

Dear Editor:

I have been reading Ranch Romances for two years. I think it is one of the best magazines that is published.

Will you please print this in Our Air Mail? I would like to get some pen pals. I promise to answer every letter. I am a brunette, twenty-two years old.

Best of luck to the Double R.

Yours sincerely,

BEATRICE McLEAN.

2311 N. W. 23rd Ave.,
Portland, Ore.

'WAY DOWN EAST

Dear Editor:

Three cheers for R. R.! I think it is one of the best magazines out. I should like very much to have some pen pals. Anyone from anywhere is welcome, and I will answer all letters and exchange snaps.

I am twenty years old, have brown hair and blue eyes. Like all kinds of sports and music. Everybody, write!

Sincerely,

BERTHA MARTIN.

16 Ralph St.,
Bangor, Me.

WRITE TO HELEN

Dear Editor:

I should like to express how much I appreciate the fine stories in Ranch Romances. All I can say is, "They're keen."

I am a girl nineteen years of age, blonde with blue eyes, and only four feet eleven inches short. I am slightly deformed and get awfully lonesome, so won't all you boys and girls please write to me? I'll answer all letters and tell many interesting things. All who are interested, please drop me a line.

Loads of luck to the Double R.

Sincerely,

HELEN MEYERS.

2440 N. Harding Ave.,
Chicago, Ill.

KEEP THE SOLDIER CHEERFUL

Dear Editor:

I have been reading R. R. for the past two years, and I find the stories very interesting. Keep it up, you will go far.

Please insert this plea for pen pals. I am a lonesome soldier stationed in the Philippine Islands. Am an athlete and I also specialize in dancing. I am twenty years of age, have blue eyes and blond hair, and am fairly good-looking. Come on, everybody, keep the soldier cheerful. I will exchange photos with anyone.

Best of luck to a capital magazine.

Sincerely,

"WHITEY."

Private Francis S. Maslowski,
Batt. G. 59th Coast Artillery,
Fort Hughes,
Philippine Islands.

HE HAS CHASED BANDITS

Dear Editor:

I am a constant reader of your wonderful magazine, R. R., and hope you will print this letter. Am a lonely marine aviator and have spent the last eighteen months bandit-chasing in Nicaragua.

Would like to have many pen pals all over the U. S. I am five feet eleven inches tall, and have light brown hair and blue eyes. Will promise to answer all letters.

Sincerely yours,

CLARENCE F. SWANSON.

Aircraft Sqdrns., A. S. C. I. M.
Quantico, Va.

SAILOR BOY

Dear Editor:

I am going to send you a description of myself, which I hope you will find room for in your pen pal section.

I am twenty-one years old, have light hair and blue eyes. I am a lonely sailor on the Asiatic Station. Will tell you all about China.

Please write and I will answer all letters.

LOUIS HADA.

U. S. S. Edsall,
c/o Postmaster,
Asiatic Station,
Seattle, Wash.

R. R. IS THE FAVORITE

Dear Editor:

I have been reading your magazine for many years. I became a constant reader of Ranch Romances in London, England, and have been able to get a copy almost every place I've been, and I have traveled nearly half around the world. Since I have been in the service, I have found that your magazine is the most favored among the fellows. This is my first attempt to make friends through Our Air Mail, and I hope you will be so kind as to publish this plea.

I hail from Germany. On my travels I have passed through Poland, Denmark, Holland, England and Panama. America is my second home and certainly one to be proud of. For the past year I have been here in Hawaii and become quite lonesome at times.

I would like to make friends all over the world and would appreciate it very much if anyone would write a lonesome soldier. I promise to answer all letters and tell you about my travels, and exchange snapshots if you wish. So come on, you ink slingers, and don't let me wait too long.

I am five feet eight inches, have brown hair, brown eyes and a tropical tan complexion. I would like to hear from either sex between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five.

HERBERT C. PFIEFFER.

Hq. Det. 1st Bn. 64th C. A.,
Fort Shafter,
Honolulu, Hawaii.

AN OUTDOOR LOVER

Dear Editor:

I enjoy your magazine so much because it breathes of the great open spaces of which I am so fond. But as I am forced to live in a crowded city at the present time, I get very lonely. It is very hard to make friends, therefore would you be kind enough to publish my letter?

I would like pen pals from all over, and will try to make my letters interesting. I have camped and toured in Canada from coast to coast. I am a widow in my late thirties, but enjoy outdoor life, also music and the theater.

Thanking you, I remain

Yours truly,
Mrs. MARY PRIDHAM.

102 Queen St. W.,
Toronto, Canada.

EXPERT RIFLE SHOT

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader and admirer of Ranch Romances for many years. Your stories are so excellent that I cannot lay down the magazine until I have finished the last story. I am very eager to obtain many pen pals and will trade letters and snapshots with anyone who will write me.

At present I am a midshipman at the U. S. Naval Academy. I have been in the navy about four years, previously serving as an aviation mechanic. Have traveled a great deal; been abroad twice and to the West Indies.

I am twenty-two years of age, tall and blond. I can read, speak and write Swedish and Spanish. I am fond of all sports and am an expert rifle shot.

Here's wishing the Double R continued success.

Very truly yours,
KARL E. JOHANSSON.

Mid'n Karl E. Johansson, U. S. N.,
3254 Bancroft Hall,
Annapolis, Md.

FROM NEW ENGLAND

Dear Editor:

I have been reading your magazine for two years, and not only myself but the whole family enjoy it. Now I am looking for pen pals—near and far. All answers will find a welcome sign on my mail box, especially those from foreign countries.

I am twenty-three years old, and a high school graduate. As I spent a year in a college near Richmond, Virginia, I can tell some about the old and new South.

May my success in receiving pen pals be as great as yours in producing a wonderful magazine.

Sincerely,
CATHERINE A. SMITH.

Lancaster, N. H.

"FLO" IS ATHLETIC

Dear Editor:

I wonder if you could find a small space for an English girl to appeal for pen pals. I have replied to numerous requests printed in Ranch Romances, but up to date I have not had any replies.

I expect it is because the magazines from which I have taken them have been back numbers. I am afraid we experience great difficulty over here to procure recent editions. I have therefore arrived at the conclusion that it is pehaps much better to make a personal appeal, so here goes.

As it seems customary to give a description of oneself and one's favorite pastime, here are mine. I am nineteen years of age, have blue eyes, brown wavy hair, and a fair complexion. I expect I could pass as good-looking on a dark night. I am very fond of dancing and I play tennis every day during the season. I am a pretty strong swimmer and I also go camping and hiking.

If any pals from Australia and the United States feel inclined to write, I should be most pleased to let them have an interesting reply.

Here's wishing Ranch Romances heaps of success in the future, and hoping that you will be able to find a small space for me somewhere, I am

Yours sincerely,
FLORENCE CRAWFORD.

13 Murray St.,
Higher Broughton,
Salford,
Lancashire, England.

P. S.—If Charles Wallington and Thomas J. Powers see this and would like another pen pal, please write and tell me about Fort Shafter and the Islands.

CURE HER BLUES

Dear Editor:

I've been reading your magazine for a short time and am not merely impressed by your Air Mail section, but the magazine as a whole.

Because I am lonely, and at times blue, I would like to have some pen pals as a cure for the blues. I long to go out West, and I hope I shall some day.

My hobby is stamp collecting and reading. I find both very absorbing and educational. I am seventeen years old, and a brunette with green eyes.

I would like to hear from Western folk of both sexes. I'll answer every letter I get. So come one, come all, and fill my mail box to overflowing.

Eagerly waiting for letters, I am

"DEE" DIDOW.

85 Brennan St.,
East Haven, Conn.

WATCH OUT FOR "JACK"

Dear Editor:

I am a young man of twenty-six, five feet ten inches tall, weighing a hundred and thirty-five pounds. I have light brown hair, gray eyes and light complexion. I play a violin and a ukulele, and like to read and travel.

At present I'm planning an auto trip to Portland, Oregon, and if the Trail's Enders who live on U. S. 40 to Colorado Springs, U. S. 85 to Las Vegas, New Mexico, U. S. 66 to Los Angeles, U. S. 99 to Portland, Oregon, will write to me, I will call on them. Would also like to hear from those living west of the Cascade Mountain Range in Oregon and Washington.

Should my plans go astray, I will answer every dog-goned letter anyway. So, folks, let's hear from all of you.

Ranch Romances is great; keep it going strong.

Sincerely yours,
"JACK."

E. Jackson Dix,
Gen. Del.,
Shelburn, Ind.

NEW ZEALAND ON THE AIR

Dear Editor:

I would like my name published in your magazine for pen friends, either sex, between the ages of nineteen and twenty-six. Have them enclose a photograph with the first letter, if possible. I am nineteen years of age.

Hoping to hear from them soon, and thanking you in anticipation, I remain

EDNA DOYLE.

c/o Cook Hospital,
North Island,
Gisborne, New Zealand.

SHE KEEPS HER PROMISES

Dear Editor:

Just another of Ranch Romances' many readers making a request for pen pals. I'd like to have just lots and lots of them, as I live in a small town and have almost nothing to do but write letters.

I've written heaps of letters to pen pals, but they haven't answered, so won't you please publish this? I'm twenty-two years old, a medium-blonde with blue eyes. I promise to answer every letter, and I never break promises.

All the luck in the world to R. R.

Sincerely,
HELEN ROSEBOOM.

718 Maplewood Ave.,
Circleville, Ohio.

WRITING LETTERS HER HOBBY

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of your magazine for several years and like it very much. I also enjoy Our Air Mail and hope very much to see this letter in print.

I live on a farm in good old Missouri, and sometimes I get a bit lonesime. Since writing letters is my favorite hobby, I should like to have pen pals from everywhere, especially from boys and girls between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five.

I am nineteen years of age, five feet eight inches tall, have gray eyes and dark brown hair. I love all kinds of good sports, especially horseback riding and boating.

I'm waiting for lots of cheery letters that will fill my mail box.

Sincerely,
MAMIE WILSON.

R. R. 5,
Poplar Bluff, Mo.

LONELY BOY SCOUT

Dear Editor:

I have been reading your magazine for six months and I like it very much. I would like to hear from cowgirls and cowboys, or anyone else who wishes to write. Please save a little space for a lonely Boy Scout. I am sixteen, have black hair and blue eyes. Write and find out more.

Sincerely,

GENE.

232 Live Oak St.,
Tabor, N. C.

AN INVITATION FROM JESSIE

Dear Editor:

I have been a constant reader of R. R. for some time and have really enjoyed it. I would like very much to hear from boys and girls of all ages, especially those from foreign countries.

I enjoy swimming and dancing, and like writing letters and exchanging snaps. I am sixteen years old, have blue eyes and auburn hair.

Hoping to see this in your next issue, I am

Sincerely,

"AUBURN."

Jessie Moffett,
293 Simcoe St.,
London, Ontario,
Canada.

BRING CHEER TO "BUZZY"

Dear Editor:

I am an acting 1st Sergeant in Hawaii. I am five feet ten inches tall, twenty-nine years old, have dark hair and eyes, and despite my rank, still have all my teeth. I have a cheerful disposition, but haven't many friends, owing to my heavy work. My only fault is a too generous nature.

Please, all you young folks, write to me soon. I promise a letter and souvenir to every correspondent.

Sincerely yours,

"BUZZY."

Anton M. Heemskirk,
Act. 1st. Sgt., "A" Co. 21st. Inf.
Schofield Barracks, T. H.

A BRIEF FROM LONDON

Dear Editor:

Would be glad to hear from any of your readers anywhere. I am interested in travel, view cards, and the passing show.

A LONDONER.

Alex Richardson,
10 Lanark Mansions,
Maida Hill,
London, W. C., England.

CHANCES ARE GOOD

Dear Editor:

How are chances of my seeing this plea for pen pals in print? I sure would like to get letters from far and near. I will answer all letters I get, from young or old, and also exchange photographs. I am thirty-seven years of age, have ash-blonde hair and gray-blue eyes.

I have been reading Ranch Romances for five years and enjoy the stories very much.

Sincerely,

EMMA SMITH.

48 Tennis Ave.
Ambler, Penn.

TERRY HAS BEEN AROUND

Dear Editor:

I must confess that I'm an entirely newcomer. Just happened to read a copy of Ranch Romances and liked it; I aim to read many more. I think Our Air Mail is an excellent idea. May I have the honor of seeing this letter in print in the next issue? I'm going to look for it anyway.

I would like to hear from all the girls and boys. I would be especially pleased to correspond with some girl in England. I am twenty-four years young, have blue eyes and black curly hair, and am five feet ten inches tall. Will send snaps to those who write, then they can be the judges.

I can tell all about Honolulu, Panama, Haiti, Cuba and the West Indies—also Nicaragua, if anyone is interested.

How are chances for at least one steady pen pal?

TERRY SHANNON.

448 Morrell St.,
Sheridan, Wyo.

RIDE 'EM, COWGIRL!

Dear Editor:

I am a constant reader of Ranch Romances and enjoy it very much.

I am a blonde, dark-eyed, eighteen-year-old Texas cowgirl. I like everything, but most of all riding horseback, dancing and writing letters.

Come on, boys and girls, and fill my mail box. I promise a speedy answer and will exchange snaps.

Best wishes to the success of the Double R.

Sincerely,

"DEE."

Tena Lois Smith,
Box 10,
Azle, Tex.

FROM THE EVERGLADES

Dear Editor:

I have no written you in the last two years, because I have traveled quite a bit since. I left Stuart, Florida. Now I am settled down here and I would like to get some pen pals.

The last letter you published for me sure filled up my mail box. Don't think that I have not been reading Ranch Romances, for I have not missed an issue since I started reading them, about five years ago. The stories get better all the time.

Well, I still have my pin, so please publish this for me. I am out in the Everglades now and can tell the pen pals many things of interest.

I am twenty-two years of age, have brown hair and gray eyes. Will answer all letters and trade cowboy poems and songs.

WILLIAM LONG.

Box 413,
Belle Glade, Fla.

INTRODUCING RONALD

Dear Editor:

I am an enthusiastic reader of Ranch Romances and think it is just fine. How about an introduction to your vast army of readers? Would appreciate hearing from those in places far from Detroit, though Michigan is not barred. Anyone from anywhere is welcome.

I am thirty-two. I like outdoor life and music; I'm also interested in dramatics, and am a fairly good elocutionist. Will gladly exchange snaps with those who care to.

Lads and lassies, all write to a lonely Newfoundlander.

Very truly yours,

RONALD MARTIN.

5896 Driggs Ave.,
Detroit, Mich.

JUST BACK FROM CHINA

Dear Editor:

I have been reading your magazine for almost five years. It was one of my best pals when I was in China.

I am twenty-two years old, five feet ten inches tall, have black wavy hair and brown eyes. I have seen a great deal of the old world and can relate many strange tales concerning it.

I am editor of the ship's paper, "The Borie Bee," and will send a copy to the first ten who write to me. Will exchange snapshots with anyone. Come on, you lusty pen pushers, and give a lonesome gob a break. I promise to answer all letters received.

Wishing Ranch Romances the best of luck and success, I am

ROBERT R. ENGLISH.

c/o Postmaster,
U. S. S. Borie 215,
San Diego, Calif.

NOT ANOTHER LIKE R. R.

Dear Editor:

I have been a constant reader of Ranch Romances for the last five years. Yes, I can truthfully say there isn't another magazine that has the thrilling stories contained in the Double R.

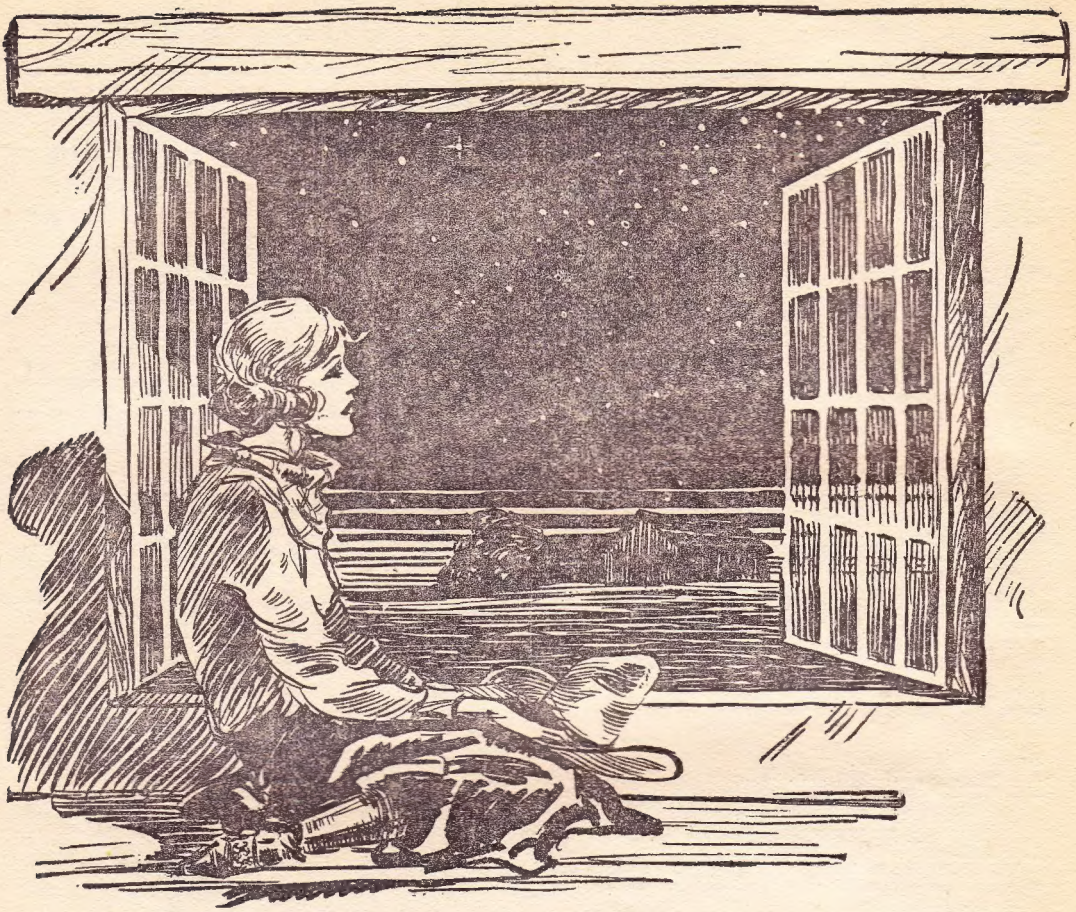
I sure do crave some pen pals and will answer all letters that I receive. I am a first-class mechanic in Uncle Sam's Navy, and I have traveled all over the world. I am six feet tall, have dark hair and blue eyes, and I am thirty-four years old.

Hoping to see my plea printed soon, I remain

Sincerly,

"BILL."

William R. Lewis,
United States Naval Station,
Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.



WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

BY PROFESSOR MARCUS MARI

SEPTEMBER

VIRGO

VIRGO rules until September twenty-third. These people are fine scholars, musicians and leaders along educational lines. They are original in speech and their minds are quick and well balanced.

Men of this sign should not waste time in subordinate positions as they are capable executives and work best when independent of domination. Freedom is as necessary to them as air. They chafe under restraint, give way to intolerance and impatience, and become thoroughly unhappy and make others equally wretched.

Confidence entrusted to the people of this sign is in safe keeping, for nothing under the sun can induce them to betray a trust.

They are self-conscious and sensitive in the extreme. Though they have a full share of self-esteem, they are, especially in youth, seized with a shyness which, unless checked by reason and the acquirement of poise, becomes almost a panic.

They make fine loyal friends, and in the home are delightful companions, who are very earnest in their desire to contribute to the comfort of their loved ones.

In the signs of Leo, Libra and Pisces the people of Virgo will find congenial mates and friends.

Professor Mari will give a personal reading to any reader who sends in the coupon.

Name..... Sex.....

Address.....

Exact date of birth: Year.....Month.....Date.....

Always use this coupon and enclose stamped envelope. 9-8-33

Are You Out of a Job?

If you need money send me your name and I'll show you how to start making up to

$15 a day

With my simple new Introductory Package Plan.

Deserving Men and Women Being Put To Work Rapidly

Distributing Trial Packages

Quick New Easy Way To Stop Your Money Worries—Pay Your Bills—Lift The Mortgage—Buy A Home—Have Plenty Of Cash In Your Pocket!

When I thought of my new Introductory Package Plan, I knew it was going to be a great thing. With good jobs scarce my Advertising Plan is a blessing to the unemployed and poorly paid. Cash starts coming in FIRST DAY. Men and women who help me make up to $1.25 an hour for spare time work or $9.50 a day for placing 25 packages. You can work full time or spare time and start taking in money the first day.

PAY STARTS AT ONCE

My new plan provides an immediate cash income for honest and reliable men and women. I want someone in every territory to look after my business. My new Trial Package Idea is sweeping the country, so that you can go to work at once right in your own locality.

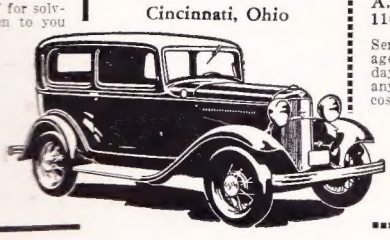
VACANCIES BEING FILLED RAPIDLY

Better send me your name today. You can't expect an opportunity like this to go begging long. There are a lot of people like yourself who have been out of work, or working for poor wages, who are going to snap up good vacant localities for their own routes. Here's what some have already done: M. Minches, Calif., "Have profits of $75 in six days"; W. A. Canover, N. J., says, "My daily earnings have been as high as $12.40"; Raymond J. Mura, N. J., "Made from $10 to $20 clear profit a day"; J. Grunell, Wis., "Made $43.50 first day"; G. V. Budaus, Tex., tripled his former income of $20 a week and says, "I now make from $55 to $65 a week"; Mrs. L. P. McNeal, Penn., clears $19.92 in ten hours spare time. These exceptional earnings are proof of amazing possibilities of my offer.

FREE AS AN EXTRA BONUS

NEW FORD TUDOR SEDAN

This is NOT a contest or a "prize" for solving puzzles. This Ford is not given to you in place of your money. No! But to every one who proves to me that he is "on the job" and building up a real trade through proper and courteous handling of customers, I give this car as an extra bonus—in addition to what you make every day in cash. If you already have a car I'll give you an equal amount in cash instead. I'll explain this fully when I send you details of my Trial Package Plan.



NO LIMIT TO MY OFFER

You may wonder at making such big money even in hard times. But this plan of Trial Package distribution is doing exactly that for hundreds. The "Trial Package" Plan is simple. Your first work on this new job will be to distribute introductory packages of my line to people in your neighborhood. After they have had a chance to use these products and see how they save money, they give you their orders for full size packages. You handle the money and deliver the goods. And a big share of every dollar we take in goes into your pocket as your pay. The pay for this work is frequently as high as $15 a day. Even at the start placing only 25 trial packages a day will pay you $9.50—regular and steady.

Your Own Groceries At Wholesale

When I send you instructions for making money on my new Trial Package Plan, I also give you rock-bottom, wholesale prices on your own groceries—about half of regular retail prices. This is in addition to your regular pay. So you can MAKE big money in cash and SAVE big money on the things you use in your own home.

Have Permanent Route With Big Weekly Cash Income

With my plan you should have a big list of regular customers that you call on every two weeks, and with an established route which requires only 30 calls a day your pay can easily be $15 a day steady. If you want to have only a 15 call route and work only half days, you can still make up to $7.50 a day—and even that gives you $45 a week—not bad for half time.

Don't Send Money—Just Your Name

Don't confuse this with anything you have ever read before—I don't want your money—I need help. Send me your name so I can lay the facts before you, then you can decide if the pay is satisfactory. You don't need experience or capital with me. I furnish everything including FORD SEDAN to producers. Don't expect me to wait indefinitely to hear from you. If you reply promptly it will be a strong thing in your favor with me. SEND TODAY—EVERYTHING IS FREE.

A. L. MILLS
President
1102 Monmouth Ave.
Cincinnati, Ohio

GOOD for FREE OFFER

A. L. Mills, President,
1102 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, O.

Send me full particulars of your new Trial Package Plan showing me how I can make $9.50 a day steady and sure. This is not an order for any goods and the plan you send me is not to cost me one cent now, or ever.

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

.....

(Please Print or Write Plainly)

600

Sent for $1 Balance 10 MONTHS TO PAY

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THIS BEAUTIFUL BETROTHAL ENSEMBLE

ONLY $29.75
For Both Rings

$2.88 A Month

GX-18 . . . Perfectly matched step design Engagement and Wedding Ring ensemble; hand engraved 18-K Solid White Gold Engagement ring set with fine, brilliant, genuine blue-white diamond—wedding ring with FIVE matched genuine diamonds. A regular $42.50 value. *Sale Price for Both* $29.75—$2.88 *a month.*

If Purchased Separately

GX-19 A . . . Engagement Ring Only. $19.75—$1.88 *a month.*

GX-19 B . . . Wedding Ring Only. $12.50—$1.15 *a month.*

$27.50

LADIES' 5 DIAMOND RING
$2.65 A Month

GX-10 . . . Exquisitely hand engraved and pierced, mil-grained prong ring of 18-K Solid White Gold. Fiery, genuine blue-white diamond in center and 4 genuine diamonds on sides. A challenge to cash or credit jewelers everywhere. *Our Sale Price* $27.50—$2.65 *a mo.*

$16.95

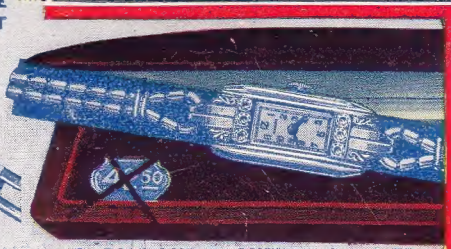
ONLY $1.59 A MONTH

GX-4 . . . Gentleman's massive, initial ring of Solid White Gold. Genuine black onyx set with a brilliant genuine diamond and any 2 initials in raised White Gold. Specify initials desired. *Special Sale Price Only* $16.95 —$1.59 *a month.*

NO EXTRA CHARGE FOR CREDIT

$16.50
Only $1.55 a month

GX-25 . . . Beautifully engraved, ultra-modern lifetime case, fitted with a fully guaranteed, dependable movement. Latest style link bracelet to match. Another outstanding bargain! *Our Sale Price* $16.50—$1.55 *a month.*



6 DIAMOND BAGUETTE WRIST WATCH $29.75
Made to Sell at $42.50
Only $2.88 a Month

GX-24 . . . Exquisitely dainty Baguette Wrist Watch! The beautifully engraved case is set with 6 fiery, genuine diamonds and fitted with a fully guaranteed dependable movement. A value and style leader without equal! *Our Sale Price* $29.75—*only* $2.88 *a month.*

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Illustrates hundreds of special values in genuine, blue-white diamonds; Bulova, Benrus, Elgin, Waltham, Hamilton, Howard, Illinois Watches, and other standard makes from $12.50 upward. Startling values in modern jewelry, silverware and cameras. Send for your copy today

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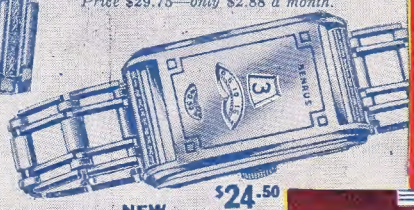
$29.75 ELGIN ONLY $21.00
$2.00 A Month

GX-23 . . . Here's outstanding value! Nationally famous **Elgin** Wrist Watch, regularly $29.75. Now only $21.00. Handsomely engraved, new model, lifetime white case. Guaranteed dependable **Elgin** movement. Latest, engraved link bracelet to match. *Our Sale Price* $21.00—*only* $2.00 *a month.*



$24.50

NEW BENRUS JUMP WATCH

GX-15 . . . First great watch improvement in 70 years! Face is metal—no more broken crystals—no more bent hands. Dials show hour, minute and second at a glance. Reads like a Speedometer. Dust-proof and jar-proof. Guaranteed accurate, **Benrus** movement. Modern, lifetime case. Bracelet to match. *Our Sale Price* $24.50—$2.35 *a month.*

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